**Case Study**

**Power Factors in World Politics: Is America’s Power in Decline?**

**Overview**

The noted scholar Hans Morgenthau titled his 1948 book *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, and that remains an excellent characterization of an international system like ours in the absence of a world government. War, the violent struggle for power, has been described by General Karl von Clausewitz (a realist) as a “continuation of politics by other means.” This case study looks at power in world politics, with specific focus on the power of the United States. Read it in the context of the many components of power and its changing nature, as discussed in this chapter.

In his best-selling book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, the historian Paul Kennedy argues that no great power of the modern era has been able to sustain great power status. Great powers typically overextend themselves militarily and economically, and, in the final analysis, the military and economic costs of their expansion exceed what they can sustain. As Lord Acton put it, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Without exercise of skill and insight, this fate could befall the United States. Consider the Iraq War’s impact on the U.S. economy, morale, and military might. By 2007 many observers were noting that the U.S. Army and the National Guard—exhausted from repeated tours, using worn-out equipment, and experiencing reduced training—was at the breaking point.

The following case study pays particular attention to U.S. power after 9/11 and especially after the U.S. preventive invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its subsequent occupation. The study illustrates how different scholars and policymakers view the changing nature of U.S. power in world politics. As you read, keep in mind the points about power made in the chapter. Especially important are the differences between hard and soft power, the major elements of objective power capabilities, and the dynamic and changing nature of power. Ask yourself how power is changing in the United States and in what direction United States power is headed.

Consider the background. U.S. power seemed dominant following its apparent blitz victory in the 2003 six-week Iraq War. President Bush’s dramatic declaration of “Mission accomplished” on the U.S. aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*, proclaiming the end of major military combat in Iraq, implied a stunning military victory over terrorism. He also explicitly connected Saddam Hussein’s regime with al Qaeda, a link that ultimately proved not to be true. Hostilities had not ended. Hundreds of American military personnel were killed in the weeks and months that followed, as were thousands of Iraqi citizens. By May 2005, some 1600 Americans had been killed and several thousand wounded or made ill in Iraq since the president’s declaration of victory. Moreover, in June 2004, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, known as the 9/11 Commission, reported that “no credible evidence” had been found of a link between Iraq and al Qaeda in the 9/11 attacks.

Meanwhile, the turmoil in Iraq and rising anti-U.S. feeling around the world raised new and less clear perceptions of U.S. power. Is it in ascendency? Or is it in decline, as others argue? As you read this case study, reflect on how you see U.S. power changing. In what direction does it seem headed? How do the contending views illustrate centralizing and decentralizing trends in world politics—and where do the paradigms we have discussed come into play? Go back and review the chapter 1 case study.

**U.S. Power Has Declined**

Perhaps the most ardent proponent of the view of U.S. power in decline is Immanuel Wallerstein, a senior research scholar at Yale University. The essence of his argument is captured in one of his most recent essays, “The Eagle Has Crash Landed.” Wallerstein argues that the United States has become a “lone superpower” that lacks real power, “a world leader that nobody follows and few respect, and a nation drifting dangerously amidst a global chaos it cannot control.” On what basis does he reach these conclusions?

First, that the United States is a powerless superpower is suggested by the highly situational and relative nature of U.S. military strength. While its huge military force and massive nuclear weapons inventory have deterred other countries from attacking the United States with nuclear weapons, they did not deter al Qaeda’s suicide terrorist attacks of 9/11. In terms of military power, Wallerstein points out, al Qaeda was nothing, yet the group succeeded in penetrating U.S. territory and delivering a debilitating blow, with huge consequences to U.S. foreign policy and global perceptions of U.S. power.

That U.S. military power is less awesome and dominating than the presence of its weapons and manpower might seem is illustrated by that power’s previous applications in world politics. The Vietnam War, Wallerstein argues, was not only a military defeat for the United States but a defeat for U.S. prestige as well. In addition, it undermined
U.S. economic power because it was extremely expensive, drained U.S. gold reserves, and cut into U.S. economic growth by reducing capital formation—a kind of parasitic economic situation represented by large-scale military spending.

Where else do we see a disconnect between massive U.S. military power and events in world politics? The collapse of the Soviet Union, in Wallerstein's view, did not occur because U.S. military power made it happen (some observers would debate this point). The Soviet Union fell apart—and with it the all-threatening (in the U.S. view) Communist Party and its links with the worldwide communist movement—primarily because of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's efforts to try to save his regime through new economic and political reforms. Indeed, the collapse, in Wallerstein's view, caught the United States by surprise, perhaps not least because the CIA had overestimated Soviet power at a time when its economy was growing weaker and weaker.

Wallerstein uses other events to suggest U.S. power is in decline, such as Saddam Hussein's willingness to invade Kuwait (1990) and "get away with it," in the sense that he was still in power after Iraq was pushed out of Kuwait in 1991. As for the Balkan crisis of the early 1990s, he argues that the basic results of ethnic divisions of the former Yugoslavia would probably be the same as they are today in places like Bosnia, although the violence would have gone on longer had U.S. power not been brought to bear. His argument, in great measure, then, is that the military remains the strongest U.S. element of power, but a close examination of its uses suggests a less potent capability to bring about desired ends than might be apparent at first glance. In the four serious wars the U.S. military has fought since 1945 (Korea, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq), one ended in defeat (Vietnam), two in draws (Korea and the Persian Gulf War), and one in which worldwide anti-Americanism (soft power decline) resulted (Iraq War).

**U.S. Power Tilts Toward Decline**

Whereas Wallerstein views U.S. power in decline—grossly overrated as to its real influence in the world—another school of thought warns that while still globally powerful, U.S. strength is at the tipping point toward decline. This argument uses multiple sources of evidence that include the country’s weak economy, dramatic decline in soft power since the preventive attack and occupation of Iraq, and threats to U.S. funding of research and development.

Consider the economy. An old saying states that if you put three economists in a room, you will get three different views about the economy. Still, by mid-2004 many economists agreed that a number of risks threaten the economic health and power of the United States. High oil prices are a constant drag on consumer spending. In this respect, U.S. oil dependence—on Saudi Arabia, where terrorist acts on oil pipelines were predicted, and in occupied Iraq, where terrorism on oil supplies occur frequently—has accentuated the geopolitical/economic health quandary. Meanwhile, the twin deficits (budget and trade) challenge economic expansion, and well-paying jobs are not growing at acceptable rates. The U.S. dollar is weak against major world currencies, and the United States has a huge trade imbalance with China and other countries. More and more manufacturing jobs are going offshore to places like China and India, and a major consulting firm in Boston, Massachusetts, urges U.S. companies to speed up their operations offshore. These include research and development, because so much engineering talent is located in China and India.

Let us turn to soft power. The decline of U.S. soft power since the war with Iraq began has been astonishing. Immediately after 9/11, nearly the whole world was united in its sympathy and support for the United States. In its war on Afghanistan after 9/11, the United States retained strong international backing. Yet as the weeks and months of early 2003 went by, the United States failed to persuade more than three of the fourteen other members of the UN Security Council to back a resolution to legitimize a military attack on Iraq. Those opposed included long-term U.S. allies (Chile, France, Germany, Mexico, and Pakistan) and newer ones, including Russia. Another U.S. ally, Turkey, refused to allow U.S. troops to enter Iraq from its territory; ultimately only British and Australian soldiers fought alongside the Americans. Throughout Western Europe during 2003, opinion polls revealed that George Bush was viewed as a greater threat to world peace than Saddam Hussein. The United States was perceived as unilateralist in its foreign policy decisions and arrogant in its indifference to world opinion. The Bush administration's withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the rejection of the Kyoto global warming treaty were sore points. With the U.S. invasion of Iraq came worldwide protests, massive marches, and street demonstrations in opposition to the military action. Since then, anti-Americanism around the world, especially throughout the Arab Middle East, has been high—and not helped by revelations of abuses in the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad in 2004. Unwillingness to tackle the Israeli-Palestinian dispute exacerbated U.S. loss of influence within the international community.

As to U.S. research and development in science and technology, various groups have been warning that although the United States remains the driving force in global science and technology, it runs a high risk of falling into decline. Threats include a decline in eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds earning science and engineering degrees at a time when the demand for such training is growing. The United States today ranks seventeenth in the proportion of this age group earning science and engineering degrees,
In the first dimension, U.S. military power is the strongest. Nye makes the case that U.S. power is three-dimensional. 

In his book, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, author Thomas Friedman points out that the world has entered the era of high globalization—a world driven by software and a global fiber-optic network that links everyone as next-door neighbors. Highly educated individuals and firms around the world can plug in and play in this world. In this globalized world the great economic phenomena is the outsourcing of the U.S. economy’s service and information-technology work to India, China, and elsewhere. In this world, Friedman points out that U.S. power is eroding rapidly, due in part to lagging education in science, math, and engineering.

**U.S. Power Is Three-Dimensional**

Paul Kennedy’s 1987 study of great power decline led Joseph Nye of Harvard University to write *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. In it, Nye argues that it is highly unlikely that great power decline lies in America’s immediate future. America’s hard (military and economic) and soft (cultural and ideological) power, he states, simply are too strong to wind up in the dustbin of history in the near term. Still, Nye reminds his readers that military strength depends on a strong economic base that must be carefully nurtured. At the same time, he argues for the rising importance of soft power and criticizes U.S. neglect and/or misuse of this type of power, which, he believes, has begun to dramatically undermine its influence in the world.

Nye makes the case that U.S. power is three-dimensional. In the first dimension, U.S. military power is the strongest in the world. As the only country with huge state-of-the-art air, naval, and ground forces capable of global deployment—as demonstrated in the 2003 Iraq war—the United States dominates the world politics chessboard. In this sense, world politics is unipolar. The second dimension, however, is economic, and here the world chessboard is multipolar, with Europe, Japan, and China frequently balancing U.S. power. The third dimension is the arena of transnational relations, which cross borders beyond government control. At the benign end of this spectrum, Nye points out, are diverse actors such as bankers who electronically transfer huge sums, while at the other end are terrorists using weapons like captured airliners for suicide missions and hackers disrupting the Internet.

Nye makes the point that the real challenges to U.S. power are formed not in the unipolar world of military power but in that third dimension of transnational interdependence. As the information revolution and globalization increasingly transform this transnational soft-power arena, Nye believes that the United States faces ever-growing challenges. This is so because technology is diffusing power away from governments and empowering individuals and groups to play key roles in world politics—and these roles include massive destruction once in the grasp of governments only. As another example of the threat, he reminds us that in the next decade or two, Chinese may become the language of the largest number of Internet users. By 2007, the Asian market—comprising 36 percent of world Internet users—became larger than the U.S. market.

**The United States Remains a Dominant Hegemonic Power in Charge of Its “Empire”**

A number of scholarly observers of U.S. power have concluded that the United States is today the world’s hegemonic state in a unipolar world. With the end of the Cold War, unprecedented U.S. global power is the dominant fact of life—although the big questions are how the United States will use its power in the future and how legitimate that power is perceived by the international community. Among other regions, the Europeans are deeply concerned about how unconstrained U.S. power has become and how little they seem able to influence its exercise.

Among the issues debated in this view of the United States in the unipolar world, dominating the globe as no state ever has done, is what will become of this new “American empire.” The United States emerged from the Cold War as the only superpower. Europe has been pulled inward, and Japan is stagnant in economic and military terms. China may one day balance U.S. power, but not in the near future. With the United States in possession of a near monopoly of force internationally, as if in control of an empire, how will that power be used?

Answers come in different forms. Chalmers Johnson (*The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*) sees the United States as a “military juggernaut intent on world domination.” Niall Ferguson (*Colossus: the Price of American Empire*) is more positive. He argues that the United States is an empire and has been one for many years. Yet, in his view, it is a “liberal empire” that backs rules and institutions designed for the public good—and seeks to maintain peace, ensure freedom of the seas and skies, and promote a smooth-functioning world of international trade and finance. Without the guiding hand of the United States, the world would be one of decentralized competing states, many not democratic—in short, a world of chaos. Benjamin Barber (*Fear’s Empire: War, Terrorism and Democracy*) believes that recent unilateralist policies show the United States has empire temptations. Yet it has not quite reached empire status. Barber prefers a global government to a U.S. empire—an objective toward which the world should work.

**Conclusion**

The U.S. preventive attack on Iraq, as you can see, has raised profound questions about power—in this case U.S. power—as it has been employed in the arena of world...
politics. Scholars and policymakers offer distinct perceptions of its dynamic and changing nature as well as its overall impact on the international system. Some observers like Immanuel Wallerstein see U.S. power in decline, while others see America facing decline. Joseph Nye views power as three-dimensional, with the United States dominating only the military sphere. Several writers describe the United States as in control of an “empire,” the consequences of which are hotly debated. Which view do you believe carries the most weight? Why?

**QUESTIONS**

**Check Your Understanding**

1. What evidence does Wallerstein use to support his theme of U.S. power in decline?
2. Identify the major concepts of power discussed in this chapter that show up in the case study.
3. What would the chapter 1 case study on the *The Report of the 9/11 Commission of the U.S.* say about U.S. power in the global arena?

**Analyze the Issues**

1. According to the four views on U.S. power presented in the case study, why is today an especially good time to reflect on the power transition in world politics? Apply what you have learned about the nature of power to why U.S. power is measured in different ways by different observers.
2. Of the four views presented in the case study, which do you find most compelling? Why?
3. How, and in what ways, would you say globalization is impacting U.S. power?
4. How do you think these issues of U.S. power play out in terms of balance of power politics?

**Further Information**

Benjamin Barber, *Fear’s Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).


**Videos and Media Sources**


Japan’s rising soft power may be studied at: http://www.gloc.com/semian/past_seminar/platform/20031016_october_s10/index.html.

On the world’s view of America and U.S. companies’ outsourcing, videos are available from the PBS program *Now*, with Bill Moyers. Go to the *Now* website and check the following date: May 7, 2004. http://www.pbs.org/now/thisweek/archive.html.

For an insightful discussion of how globalization and interdependence affects U.S. power, go to http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=3311.