

# IMAGINING A POST AMERICAN WORLD: THE EUROPEAN UNION AS THE NEW SUPER POWER?

*Today a country seeking to fill the U.S.' position has to have great influence, tremendous resources, a universal ideology and strong political will in order to succeed. The EU may be a regional power that is influential over Eurasia, yet in order to speak of the EU as a superpower, one has to qualify whether the EU displays an enormous economic-financial-industrial might, influential political leadership, and a military in possession of insurmountable technological capabilities.*

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In his groundbreaking manuscript, *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci stated: “The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth.”<sup>1</sup> At the point we have reached today, the United States’ position in the international arena, in a way, reflects the realities behind this statement. This, of course, brings into light the following question: Who will rise in this new world that struggles to come forth? In light of the rise of the EU in the global arena, this paper will aim to explore this question.

In international relations literature, theorists like Robert Cox<sup>2</sup>, Stephen Gill<sup>3</sup> and Susan Strange<sup>4</sup> who are mostly inspired by the Gramscian theoretical framework, attempt to analyze the kind of hegemonic power (in terms of both its capability to act as a coercive power and fabricate consent and legitimacy) the U.S. constitutes on economic, military, political, social and cultural levels. Especially since the collapse of the bipolar world of the Cold War, the U.S. increasingly consolidated its hegemonic power.<sup>5</sup> However, on 11 September 2001, suicide attacks by Al-Qaeda changed global dynamics as well as the fundamental notions of international relations. Previously displaying its hegemonic power by highlighting its economic and cultural supremacy, with the exception of the Balkans in mid 1990s and a failed attempt in Somalia, this time, the U.S. started emphasizing more on its military power.<sup>6</sup> The whole world witnessed the most striking reflections of this change, first in Afghanistan and subsequently in Iraq.

Economically speaking, the U.S. government also went through a rough stage where the bankruptcy of Enron in early 2000s followed the American government’s seizure of Washington Mutual, the country’s biggest savings bank. Moreover, the latest global crisis, which broke out in the U.S. and had a domino effect, dragged many multinational companies along.<sup>7</sup> These negative economic developments in the U.S. economy have also contributed to putting the fragility of U.S. hegemony in the spotlight.

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. And trans. By Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart 1971, pp. 169-170.

<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method” in Stephen Gill, ed. Gramsci, *Historical Materialism and International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Gill, ed. Gramsci, *Historical Materialism and International Relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993)

<sup>4</sup> Susan Strange, *State and Markets*, London: Printer Publishers 1988 and Susan Strange, “Towards a Theory of Transnational Empire” in Roger Toose and Christopher May, eds. *Authority and Markets: Susan Strange’s Writings on International Political Economy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)

<sup>5</sup> Simon Bromley, “The Logic of American Power in the International Capitalist Order” in Alejandro Coles and Richard Saull, eds., *The War on Terrorism and the American Empire After the Cold War*, (London: Routledge 2006), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Fuat Keyman, “ABD hegemonyası”, *Radikal İki*, 12 January 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Vassilis K. Fouskas and Bulent Gokay, *The New American Imperialism: Bush’s War on Terror and Blood for Oil*, (New York: Praeger Security International 2005), p. 16.

Given its economic and military misfortunes, the United States now faces a formidable rival, the European Union (EU); its equal in production and trade. With the initiation of the third stage of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in 1999, the EU gained significant momentum for completing regional integration. According to Charles Kupchan, the EU “is arriving on the global stage. Now that its single market has been accompanied with a single currency, Europe has a collective weight on matters of trade and finance comparable to that of the United States.”<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, John McCormick has contended that “the EU is a new breed of superpower [within a] post-modern bipolar system.”<sup>9</sup> Even if the EU does not have a standing army, it has nevertheless already established itself as a strong political entity, anchored by France and Germany.<sup>10</sup> However, it may still be too early to speak of the EU as the new superpower. Notwithstanding the presence of these considerable assets, it is still difficult to dub the EU as a hegemonic power alternative to the United States for a number of reasons, some of which will be explored in this article.

### ***Signs of a Continental Move***

As one of the most important theorists of liberalism, philosopher John Gray indicated in an article published in September 2008 that the latest global economic crisis would lead to America’s decline just like the fall of the Berlin Wall caused the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, a historical and geopolitical change would take place and American hegemony, sustained since the Second World War, would come to an end. As evidence to the decline of American hegemony, the author pointed to the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez mocking America’s power and the U.S. just quietly brushing this humiliation aside.

Indeed, it is necessary to acknowledge that a continental move is taking place. Leftist politicians are coming to power in Latin America and Middle Eastern organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah, although handicapped by their own anti-Israeli views, also seize power in their respective geographies. These can be read as striking manifestations of the failures of U.S.’ foreign policy. Today U.S. hegemony is continuing to have trouble in mainly three regions: the Middle East, Eurasia, and Latin America. It is obvious that if the U.S. loses support in these regions, this will affect its global dominance. Here, it is also important to keep in mind numerous failures of George W. Bush during his presidency, and the negative American image he constructed. In the case of Venezuela, Chavez challenged

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Kupchan, *The End of the American Era: US Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the 21st Century* (Vintage, 2003), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> John McCormick, *The European Superpower*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Richard B. Du Boff, “U.S. Hegemony: Continuing Decline, Enduring Danger”, *Monthly Review*, Vol. 55 No. 7 (December 2003).

<sup>11</sup> John Gray, “A shattering moment in American’s falls from power”, *The Observer*, 28 September 2008.

American hegemony. In doing so, he also managed to obtain support from the current leaders of Cuba, Bolivia and Ecuador. He launched a campaign, which aimed to take oil and gas resources away from Western corporations and to give control directly into the hands of the state.

Let us also recall that on the other side of the Atlantic, Europe was very troubled by the war in Iraq. France's "stubborn" foreign policy towards Lebanon, Europe's

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refusal to make a military contribution in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Britain's opposition to an agreement in Darfur were all processes that highlight views discordant with the American policy, thus leading to the weakening of the U.S.' hegemonic position and legitimacy of its global rhetoric throughout the world. Embarking on the invasion, the U.S. had to stand up against Europe's most critical countries, Germany and France and joining them Russia, China, the entire Muslim world, India and most importantly, the global public. In coun-

tries like Britain and Australia, whose governments supported the U.S., the public clearly expressed an anti-war attitude. Following the invasion Britain's then-Prime Minister Tony Blair lost power. Not since the Vietnam has a foreign policy maneuver taken by the U.S. received such harsh responses from the entire world.

Furthermore, today, after remaining in the shadow of American power for over 20 years, China and Russia are moving in a sharp and rapid way and contesting U.S.-supported revolutions in Central Asia. Uzbekistan returned to Moscow's domain and Kyrgyzstan and Belarus successfully countered U.S.-supported revolts. America could not manage to secure its political acquisitions in Ukraine on a safe ground and Georgia was exposed to Russia's harsh response following its close relations with Washington. Moreover, smaller states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, acted in a manner bold enough to demand U.S. bases to be shut down.

Furthermore, the war on terror revolving around the doctrine of "pre-emptive war"<sup>12</sup> ironically helped strengthen China's relationship with Russia. The alliance

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<sup>12</sup> The Pre-emptive War Doctrine" also known as the "Bush Doctrine" is a doctrine established on preventing the strike capacity of a state considered rival or enemy by taking action before giving it a chance to attack. See *US Government, National Security Strategy of the U.S.*, Washington, DC: The White House, 2002.

between China and Russia further expanded through economic growth. Not paying any heed to American threats, Russia equipped Venezuela and Iran with modern weapons. Chinese energy corporations signed oil contracts in regions traditionally in concession of American oil giants. In the Middle East, both Russia and China strongly objected to America's stance against Iran. And finally, in the Korean Peninsula, Washington was once again unable to prevent North Korea from becoming a nuclear power.

All over the Muslim world, levels of support for America are at the lowest of all times. The severity of insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan crippled the U.S. army and forced President Bush to give up his plans to "spread democracy". Unable to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan, the American president had to put forward the Truman Doctrine once again and appeal to secular autocracies like Syria, Iran and Pakistan for help. Instead of reshaping the Muslim world in line with American ideals, the incompetent policies of the Bush administration Islamicized the region, awakened Muslim masses, politicized them and steered Muslim intellectuals. This situation developed many new visions, strategies and tactics critical of American power. Thus they weakened America's image as a hegemonic power by complicating and limiting President Bush's political agenda.

In this framework, the key question is essentially the one raised by Fareed Zakaria:<sup>13</sup> "Will history strike to the United States as well? Is it already striking?"<sup>14</sup> The problem that the U.S. government is facing today stems from Washington turning blind to the new world emerging around it and not giving any concrete signal that it can adapt American policies to a new era. A superpower undefeated in terms of military strength has won an easy victory in Afghanistan and then started another war thinking it would once again succeed effortlessly against Saddam Hussein's alienated regime in Iraq. After a swift military victory the final result was a challenging, however, and the U.S. was subjected to intense international opposition. Whatever the consequences in Iraq may be, the losses are immense. America's image as a model democracy is now tainted. States like Iran and Venezuela and great powers like China and Russia are taking advantage of Washington's careless actions and criticizing U.S. policies on these grounds. Another imperial downfall that we have come to be familiar with throughout history is taking place. In other words, history is repeating itself.

Today, U.S.' political system has lost the ability to heal its own wounds. Presently, the U.S. faces serious economic challenges. These challenges are also engendered by certain government policies. The U.S. economy and American society in

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<sup>13</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Future of American Power", *Foreign Affairs*, May-June, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

general are competent enough to respond to economic pressures they are facing. The major issue however is, whether it is possible for Washington to put things in order and adapt in a world where others are emerging. For almost 20 years, the U.S. has maintained its absolute unrivalled position. Perhaps, ever since the World War II ended, the world remained within the same structure modeled by the U.S. However the world today is at the crossroads of a breaking point in history.

*"...what will happen after America loses its title as the sole superpower of the world?"*

In the last 500 years, we have witnessed changes of power in the global structure three times.<sup>15</sup> First was the rise of the Western world, which began in the 15th century and gained momentum at the end of the 18th century. This brought about the concept of modernity, as we know it: science, technology, trade, capitalism, and agricultural and industrial revolutions. The second alteration occurred at the end

of the 19th century: the rise of the United States of America. Right after its industrialization, the U.S. became the strongest nation since the Roman Empire and attained a more powerful position than any of the other nations combined. For the major part of the following century the U.S. dominated economy, politics, science and culture. In the last 20 years there was no other power to match American hegemony, which is unprecedented in history. And now we witness the third big change of power in the modern era: The rise of other multiple actors. We see that for the last 20 to 30 years, a number of countries are achieving unimaginable economic growth rates and challenging the U.S economically.<sup>16</sup>

There are certain policies and programs that can be supported in order for the U.S. economy and society to recover. For such a recovery, change in strategy and actions is necessary. The U.S. must accept that it has to make the following decision: It can either contribute to the stability of the emerging new order by winning over new nations and publics, while giving up some of its power and rights and acknowledging a world made up of various voices and perspectives, or it will be just an onlooker to the facts of ultra-nationalism, disintegration and decline which will slowly shatter the world order the U.S. itself set up in the last 60 years.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See Immanuel Wallerstein, *Jeopolitik ve Jeokültür*, (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 1998); I. Wallerstein, *Güncel Yorumlar*, (İstanbul: Aram, 2001). Giovanni Arrighi, *Uzun Yirminci Yüzyıl*, (Ankara: İmge, 1998); Christopher Chace-Dunn, *The Global Formation*, (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1992)

<sup>16</sup> Peter Gowan, "Pax Europaea" July-August 2005, *New Left Review*, Vol. 34, pp. 134-142.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Beeson & Richard Higgott, "Hegemony, Institutionalism and U.S. Foreign Policy: theory and practice in comparative historical perspective" in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol: 26 No. 7, p. 1179.

## *Imagining a Post American World?*

The question that needs to be tackled therefore is: what will happen after America loses its title as the sole superpower of the world? Both China and India lack the political will and experience to influence world politics.<sup>18</sup> In the foreseeable future both of these states will remain influential within their region.

Can the EU be considered an international power then? Even though the EU is a great unifying project, one has to admit that the EU has a long way to go in terms of political integration and economic cooperation and consolidation. As a matter of fact, it is fairly difficult to think of the EU as a super power in the classical sense of the word. The EU is without a doubt an influential transatlantic/regional power,<sup>19</sup> however some argue that discussions on the EU as a soft power display the Union's palpable weakness.<sup>20</sup> Opposed to this view, other scholars maintain that its "soft" quality, that is, its strength in non-military and non-coercive terms, makes EU an influential actor in the international scene.<sup>21</sup> Although it is a fact that the Union is one of the greatest economic actors in the world trade, being a strong economic actor does not suffice for the EU to become a world power and exert political influence in the internal political arena. As Waltz<sup>22</sup> and others have argued, "the basic components of any kind of power are force, political will, and legitimacy."<sup>23</sup> And these elements that Waltz lists seem to be what is missing in the EU.

Undoubtedly, the EU is an important "trade power" in terms of having influence on policies of other countries. But can the EU transform this economic power into a political one? As they tackle this question, Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaidis coin the term "conflicted trade power" to describe the EU.<sup>24</sup> This means that the EU

<sup>18</sup> Arrighi claims that global capital accumulation center is Far East, specifically Japan and he considers Japan as the next hegemony candidate. Even if a country comes out victorious from the following hegemonic struggle and the prevailing turn out to be Japan, it seems unlikely that this state with both its geographical depth and population will be able to perform successfully. Giovanni Arrighi, "The Global Market," *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. V, No. 2, 1999, pp. 217–251.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Kagan, (2003) *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, (New York: Knopf).

<sup>20</sup> Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaidis, "The European Union as a conflicted trade power", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 13 No. 6, September 2006: 906–925.

<sup>21</sup> Ian Manners (2002) "Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2): 235–58; M. Leonard, (2005) *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century*, (London: Fourth Estate; K.E Smith., 2005) "Still civilian power EU?", *European Foreign Policy Unit Working Paper* 2005/1, (London School of Economics).

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz (1979) *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, (MA: Addison-Wesley).

<sup>23</sup> Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaidis, "The European Union as a conflicted trade power ", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 13 No. 6

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

harbors different views, conflicting outlooks, and policies of her member states.<sup>25</sup> Following these scholars, one could argue that in a Union where “a certain political will, of a genuine shared commitment on the part of a plurality of actors...to make the necessary sacrifices to support its ambitions”<sup>26</sup> is missing, it is hard to talk of consensus-based, collaborative policies that would offer an alternative to the U.S.

Having started with Gramsci, it is appropriate to end this article with inspiration from his arguments. Today a country seeking to fill the U.S.’ position has to have great influence, tremendous resources, a universal ideology and strong political will in order to succeed. The EU may be a regional power that is influential over Eurasia, yet in order to speak of the EU as a superpower, one has to qualify whether the EU displays an enormous economic-financial-industrial might, influential political leadership, and a military in possession of insurmountable technological capabilities.

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<sup>25</sup> Some of these conflicted policies are the following: Championing multilateralism while blanketing the planter with bilateral trade agreements, or promoting the cause of economic development while protecting European agriculture.

<sup>26</sup> Sophie Meunier and Kalypto Nicolaidis, “The European Union as a conflicted trade power”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 13 No. 6