

The Sole Superpower in Decline

The Rise of a Multipolar World

Shri Dilip Hiro

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States stood tall—militarily invincible, economically unrivalled, diplomatically uncontested, and the dominating force on information channels worldwide. The next century was to be the true “American century,” with the rest of the world molding itself in the image of the sole superpower.

Yet, with not even a decade of this century behind us, we are already witnessing the rise of a multipolar world in which new powers are challenging different aspects of American supremacy — Russia and China in the forefront, with regional powers Venezuela and Iran forming the second rank. These emergent powers are primed to erode American hegemony, not confront it, singly or jointly.

How and why has the world evolved in this way so soon? The Bush administration’s debacle in Iraq is certainly a major factor in this transformation, a classic example of an imperialist power, brimming with hubris, over-extending itself. To the relief of many — in the U. S. and elsewhere — the Iraq fiasco has demonstrated the striking limitations of power for the globe’s highest-tech, most destructive military machine. In Iraq, Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to two U.S. presidents, concedes in a recent op-ed, “We are being wrestled to a draw by opponents who are not even an organised state adversary.”

The invasion and subsequent disastrous occupation of Iraq and the mismanaged military campaign in Afghanistan have crippled the credibility of the United States. The scandals at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and Guantanamo in Cuba, along with the widely publicised murders of Iraqi civilians in Haditha, have badly tarnished America’s moral self-image. In the latest opinion poll, even in a secular state and member of NATO like Turkey, only 9% of Turks have a “favorable view” of the U.S (down from 52% just five years ago).

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Yet there are other explanations — unrelated to Washington's glaring misadventures — for the current transformation in international affairs. These include, above all, the tightening market in oil and natural gas, which has enhanced the power of hydrocarbon-rich nations as never before; the rapid economic expansion of the mega-nations China and India; the transformation of China into the globe's leading manufacturing base; and the end of the Anglo-American duopoly in international television news.

Many Channels, Diverse Perceptions

During the 1991 Gulf War, only CNN and the BBC had correspondents in Baghdad. So the international TV audience, irrespective of its location, saw the conflict through their lenses. Twelve years later, when the Bush administration, backed by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, invaded Iraq, Al Jazeera Arabic broke this duopoly. It relayed images — and facts — that contradicted the Pentagon's presentation. For the first time in history, the world witnessed two versions of an ongoing war in real time. So credible was the Al Jazeera Arabic version that many television companies outside the Arabic-speaking world — in Europe, Asia and Latin America — showed its clips.

Though, in theory, the growth of cable television worldwide raised the prospect of ending the Anglo-American duopoly in 24-hour TV news, not much had happened due to the exorbitant cost of gathering and editing TV news. It was only the arrival of Al Jazeera English, funded by the hydrocarbon-rich emirate of Qatar — with its declared policy of offering a global perspective from an Arab and Muslim angle — that, in 2006, finally broke the long-established mold.

Soon France 24 came on the air, broadcasting in English and French from a French viewpoint, followed in mid-2007 by the English-language Press TV, which aimed to provide an Iranian perspective. Russia was next in line for 24-hour TV news in English for the global audience. Meanwhile, spurred by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Telesur, a pan-Latin-American TV channel based in Caracas, began competing with CNN in Spanish for a mass audience.

As with Qatar, so with Russia and Venezuela, the funding for these TV news ventures has come from soaring national

hydrocarbon incomes — a factor draining American hegemony not just in imagery but in reality.

Russia, an Energy Superpower

Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has more than recovered from the economic chaos that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. After effectively renationalising the energy industry through state-controlled corporations, he began deploying its economic clout to further Russia's foreign policy interests.

In 2005, Russia overtook the United States, becoming the second largest oil producer in the world. Its oil income now amounts to \$679 million a day. European countries dependent on imported Russian oil now include Hungary, Poland, Germany, and even Britain.

Russia is also the largest producer of natural gas on the planet, with three-fifths of its gas exports going to the 27-member European Union (EU). Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, and Slovakia get 100% of their natural gas from Russia; Turkey, 66%; Poland, 58%; Germany 41%; and France 25%. Gazprom, the biggest natural gas enterprise on Earth, has established stakes in sixteen EU countries. In 2006, the Kremlin's foreign reserves stood at \$315 billion, up from a paltry \$12 billion in 1999. Little wonder that, in July 2006 on the eve of the G8 summit in St Petersburg, Putin rejected an energy charter proposed by the Western leaders.

Soaring foreign-exchange reserves, new ballistic missiles, and closer links with a prospering China — with which it conducted joint military exercises on China's Shandong Peninsula in August 2005 — enabled Putin to deal with his American counterpart, President George W. Bush, as an equal, not mincing his words when appraising American policies.

“One country, the United States, has overstepped its national boundaries in every way,” Putin told the 43rd Munich Trans-Atlantic conference on security policy in February 2007. “This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations... This is very dangerous.”

Condemning the concept of a “unipolar world,” he added: “However one might embellish this term, at the end of the day it describes a scenario in which there is one centre of authority, one centre of force, one centre of decision-making. It is a world in

which there is one master, one sovereign. And this is pernicious." His views fell on receptive ears in the capitals of most Asian, African, and Latin American countries.

The changing relationship between Moscow and Washington was noted, among others, by analysts and policy-makers in the hydrocarbon-rich Persian Gulf region. Commenting on the visit that Putin paid to long-time U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar after the Munich conference, Abdel Aziz Sagar, chairman of the Gulf Research Centre, wrote in the Doha-based newspaper *The Peninsula* that Russia and Gulf Arab countries, once rivals from opposite ideological camps, had found a common agenda of oil, anti-terrorism, and arms sales. "The altered focus takes place in a milieu where the Gulf countries are signalling their keenness to keep all geopolitical options open, reviewing the utility of the United States as the sole security guarantor, and contemplating a collective security mechanism that involves a host of international players."

In April 2007, the Kremlin issued a major foreign policy document. "The myth about the unipolar world fell apart once and for all in Iraq," it stated. "A strong, more self-confident Russia has become an integral part of positive changes in the world."

The Kremlin's increasingly tense relations with Washington were in tune with Russian popular opinion. A poll taken during the run-up to the 2006 G8 summit revealed that 58% of Russians regarded America as an "unfriendly country." It has proved to be a trend. This July, for instance, Major General Alexandre Vladimirov told the mass circulation newspaper *Komsolskaya Pravda* that war with the United States was a "possibility" in the next ten to fifteen years.

Chavez Rides High

Such sentiments resonated with Hugo Chavez. While visiting Moscow in June 2007, he urged Russians to return to the ideas of Vladimir Lenin, especially his anti-imperialism. "The Americans don't want Russia to keep rising," he said. "But Russia has risen again as a centre of power, and we, the people of the world need Russia to become stronger."

Chavez finalised a \$1 billion deal to purchase five diesel submarines to defend Venezuela's oil-rich undersea shelf and thwart any possible future economic embargo imposed by Washington. By then, Venezuela had become the second largest buyer of Russian

weaponry. (Algeria topped the list, another indication of a growing multipolarity in world affairs.) Venezuela acquired the distinction of being the first country to receive a license from Russia to manufacture the famed AK-47 assault rifle.

By channeling some of his country's oil money to needy Venezuelans, Chavez broadened his base of support. Much to the chagrin of the Bush White House, he trounced his sole political rival, Manuel Rosales, in a December 2006 presidential contest with 61 % of the vote. Equally humiliating to the Bush administration, Venezuela was, by then, giving more foreign aid to needy Latin American states than it was.

Following his reelection, Chavez vigorously pursued the concept of forming an anti-imperialist alliance in Latin America as well as globally. He strengthened Venezuela's ties not only with such Latin countries as Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and debt-ridden Argentina, but also with Iran and Belarus.

By the time he arrived in Tehran from Moscow (via Minsk) in June 2007, the 180 economic and political accords his government had signed with Tehran were already yielding tangible results. Iranian-designed cars and tractors were coming off assembly lines in Venezuela. "[The] cooperation of independent countries like Iran and Venezuela has an effective role in defeating the policies of imperialism and saving nations," Chavez declared in Tehran.

Stuck in the quagmire of Iraq and lashed by the gusty winds of rocketing oil prices, the Bush administration finds its area of manoeuvre woefully limited when dealing with a rising hydrocarbon power. To the insults that Chavez keeps hurling at Bush, the American response has been vapid. The reason is the crippling dependence of the United States on imported petroleum which accounts for 60% of its total consumed. Venezuela is the fourth largest source of U.S. imported oil after Canada, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia; and some refineries in the U.S. are designed specifically to refine heavy Venezuelan oil.

In Chavez's scheme to undermine the "sole superpower," China has an important role. During an August 2006 visit to Beijing, his fourth in seven years, he announced that Venezuela would triple its oil exports to China to 500,000 barrels per day in three years, a jump that suited both sides. Chavez wants to diversify Venezuela's buyer base to reduce its reliance on exports to the U.S., and China's leaders

are keen to diversify their hydrocarbon imports away from the Middle East, where American influence remains strong.

"The support of China is very important [to us] from the political and moral point of view," Chavez declared. Along with a joint refinery project, China agreed to build thirteen oil drilling platforms, supply eighteen oil tankers, and collaborate with the state-owned company, Petroleos de Venezuela S.A. (PdVSA), in exploring a new oilfield in the Orinoco Basin.

China on a Stratospheric Trajectory

So dramatic has been the growth of the state-run company Petro China that, in mid-2007, it was second only to Exxon Mobil in its market value among energy corporations. Indeed, that year three Chinese companies made it onto the list of the world's ten most highly valued corporations. Only the U.S. had more with five. China's foreign reserves of over \$1 trillion have now surpassed Japan's. With its gross domestic product soaring past Germany's, China ranks number three in the world economy.

In the diplomatic arena, Chinese leaders broke new ground in 1996 by sponsoring the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), consisting of four adjoining countries: Russia and the three former Soviet Socialist republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The SCO started as a cooperative organisation with a focus on countering drug-smuggling and terrorism. Later, the SCO invited Uzbekistan to join, even though it does not abut China. In 2003, the SCO broadened its scope by including regional economic cooperation in its charter. That, in turn, led it to grant observer status to Pakistan, India, and Mongolia — all adjoining China — and Iran which does not. When the U.S. applied for observer status, it was rejected, an embarrassing setback for Washington, which enjoyed such status at the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In early August 2007, on the eve of an SCO summit in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, the group conducted its first joint military exercises, codenamed Peace Mission 2007, in the Russian Ural region of Chelyabinsk. "The SCO is destined to play a vital role in ensuring international security," said Ednan Karabayev, foreign minister of Kyrgyzstan.

In late 2006, as the host of a China-Africa Forum in Beijing attended by leaders of 48 of 53 African nations, China left the U.S.

woefully behind in the diplomatic race for that continent (and its hydrocarbon and other resources). In return for Africa's oil, iron ore, copper, and cotton, China sold low-priced goods to Africans, and assisted African countries in building or improving roads, railways, ports, hydro-electric dams, telecommunications systems, and schools. "The western approach of imposing its values and political system on other countries is not acceptable to China," said Africa specialist Wang Hongyi of the China Institute of International Studies. "We focus on mutual development."

To reduce the cost of transporting petroleum from Africa and the Middle East, China began constructing a trans-Burma oil pipeline from the Bay of Bengal to its southern province of Yunnan, thereby shortening the delivery distance now travelled by tankers. This undermined Washington's campaign to isolate Myanmar. (Earlier, Sudan, boycotted by Washington, had emerged as a leading supplier of African oil to China.) In addition, Chinese oil companies were competing fiercely with their Western counterparts in getting access to hydrocarbon reserves in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

"China's oil diplomacy is putting the country on a collision course with the U.S. and Western Europe, which have imposed sanctions on some of the countries where China is doing business," comments William Mellor of Bloomberg News. The sentiment is echoed by the other side. "I see China and the U.S. coming into conflict over energy in the years ahead," says Jin Riguang, an oil-and-gas advisor to the Chinese government and a member of the Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Council.

China's industrialisation and modernisation has spurred the modernisation of its military as well. The test-firing of the country's first anti-satellite missile, which successfully destroyed a defunct Chinese weather satellite in January 2007, dramatically demonstrated its growing technological prowess. An alarmed Washington had already noted an 18% increase in China's 2007 defence budget. Attributing the rise to extra spending on missiles, electronic warfare, and other high-tech items, Liao Xilong, Commander of the People's Liberation Army's general logistics department, said: "The present day world is no longer peaceful and to protect national security, stability and territorial integrity we must suitably increase spending on military modernisation."

China's declared budget of \$45 billion was a tiny fraction of the Pentagon's \$459 billion one. Yet, in May 2007, a Pentagon report noted China's "rapid rise as a regional and economic power with global aspirations" and claimed that it was planning to project military farther afield from the Taiwan Straits into the Asia-Pacific region in preparation for possible conflicts over territory or resources.

The Sole Superpower in the Sweep of History

This disparate challenge to American global primacy stems as much from sharpening conflicts over natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas, as from ideological differences over democracy, American style, or human rights, as conceived and promoted by Western policymakers. Perceptions about national (and imperial) identity and history are at stake as well.

It is noteworthy that Russian officials applauding the swift rise of post-Soviet Russia refer fondly to the pre-Bolshevik Revolution era when, according to them, Tsarist Russia was a Great Power. Equally, Chinese leaders remain proud of their country's long imperial past as unique among nations.

When viewed globally and in the great stretch of history, the notion of American exceptionalism that drove the neoconservatives to proclaim the Project for the New American Century in the late 20th century — adopted so wholeheartedly by the Bush administration in this one — is nothing new. Other superpowers have been there before and they, too, have witnessed the loss of their prime position to rising powers.

No superpower in modern times has maintained its supremacy for more than several generations. And, however exceptional its leaders may have thought themselves, the United States, already clearly past its zenith, has no chance of becoming an exception to this age-old pattern of history.