

**The polar system: Revisiting “The Eagle Has  
Crash Landed”**

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**Introduction**

The fourth debate in International Relations Theory was launched by Keohane in 1988. It is a debate between rationalist and reflectivist theories or a debate between explaining and understanding. The explanatory approach reduces the ontological complexity of the social world to those aspects of it that can be observed and measured. Underpinning this framework is a positivist vision of science which has its roots in an empiricist epistemology. The positivist approach to social explanation has been modified in significant ways since the 1960's as a result of a range of criticisms and diverse range of post positivist positions has emerged. “The interpretive approach rests on the conviction that meanings and beliefs are the most important factors in the study of social processes and that social inquiry could play an important role in uncovering the deep meanings that exist beneath the surface appearance of observed reality” (Kurki and Wight, 2009, 24).

The rationalism approach is deductive as it begins with a theory of the individual behavior and then utilizes observation and hypothesis testing to substantiate or falsify a set of claims relating to that behavior. Therefore, rationalism has been associated with both the explanatory and the positivist tradition in IR. A series of theories that was

sharply critical of mainstream rationalist approaches, i.e. critical theory, constructivism, post structuralism, and feminism are called reflectivist as they rejected the positivist/explanatory approach emphasizing instead reflexivity and the non-neutral nature of political and social explanation (Kurki and Wight, 25).

The fourth debate expanded the horizons of the IR discipline and enriched its contents. However, basic realism concepts such as the balance of power; the state of anarchy; and the polarity of the international system remain central themes for both scholars and policy makers. Most realists think of the international arena as an anarchical self-help system. Survival depends on a state's material capabilities and its alliances with other states. They differentiate systems on the basis of their polarity: uni, bi, and multi-polar. System change occurs when the number of poles changes. "This is often the result of hegemonic wars, brought on in turn by shifts in the balance of material capabilities" (Lebow, 2007, 66). It is generally agreed that the state system was multi polar from its inception in 1648 until the end of the second world war in 1945. It became a bipolar from the end of the Second World War until the end of the cold war in 1989 (Mearshelmer, 2009, 85).

The forty five year cold war ended with America's victory.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. became the Sole superpower among the almost two hundred states constituting the international system. It was expected that the U.S. will remain as the unipolar for the twenty first century. However, this expectation was, and still, increasingly not shared by many

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<sup>1</sup> President George H.W. Bush, in his state of the union address on Jan.28,1992 declared that "By the grace of God, America won the Cold War."

scholars. Wallerstein presented the subject as far back as 2002 in the form of the following question:

“Pax Americana is over. Challenges from Vietnam and the Balkans to the Middle East and September 11 have revealed the limits of American supremacy. Will the United States learn to fade quietly, or will U.S. conservatives resist and therefore transform gradual decline into a rapid and dangerous fall?” (Wallerstein, 2002, 60).

The purpose of this paper is to revisit Wallerstein contribution, a decade after its publication, to evaluate its arguments in the light of the events which have taken place, and to reflect on the prospects of the polar system.

### **The Wallerstein Thesis**

The YALTA summit of 1945 confirmed the status quo in which the Soviet Union controlled about one third of the World and the United States the rest. However, the United States success as a hegemonic power in the post World War II era, created the conditions of its hegemonic demise. “The process is captured in four symbols: the war in Vietnam, the revolutions of 1968, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the terrorist attacks of September 2001.” Each symbol built upon the prior one resulting in the U.S. finding itself “a lone superpower that lacks true power, a world leader nobody follows and few respect, and a nation drifting dangerously amidst a global chaos it can not control.” (P.63).

The Vietnamese people fought the French, the Japanese, and the Americans to end colonial rule and establish their own state. They won. “Washington was foolish enough to invest its full military might in the struggle, but the United States still lost”

(P.63). Vietnam was not only a military defeat but dealt a major blow to the U.S. ability to remain the world's dominant economic power. The conflict used up the U.S. gold reserves and as Western Europe and Japan were experiencing major economic upswings, the U.S. preeminence in the global economy ended (P.63).

The revolutions of 1968 which broke around the world had only minimal direct political consequences. However, “the geopolitical and intellectual repercussions were enormous and irrevocable. Centrist liberalism tumbled from the throne it had occupied since the European revolutions of 1848 and that had enabled it to co-opt conservatives and radicals alike. These ideologies returned and once again represented a real gamut of choices” (P.63).

The international economic stagnation and hyper-inflation which prevailed in the 1970's resulted in the collapse of public sector led development strategy of the Third World. This led to disintegrating order in many countries and the U.S. intervention failed, e.g. Lebanon and Somalia. The U.S. government chose to ignore the trend of declining hegemony. Moreover, the collapse of the communism signified the collapse of liberalism, and thus “removing the only ideological justification behind U.S. hegemony, a justification tacitly supported by liberalism's ostensible ideological opponent” (P.65).

This loss of legitimacy plus the end of the Yalta agreement encouraged Iraq to invade Kuwait in 1990. That action could not be tolerated by the U.S. as a hegemonic power and thus force was used to liberate Kuwait in 1991. The Balkans and the Middle

East were the two major arenas of world conflict in the interval between the Gulf war of 1991 and September 11, 2001. In both regions, “the United States has failed to exert its hegemonic clout effectively, not for want of will or effort but for want of real power” (P.65).

The attacks of September 11, 2011 enabled the hawks in the U.S. administration to dominate American policy. “The hawks believe the United States should act as an imperial power for two reasons: first, the United States can get away with it. And second, if Washington doesn’t exert its force, the United States will become increasingly marginalized” (P.66). As of 2002 the hawkish position manifested itself in the invasion of Afghanistan; the support for Israel against Arafat; and the preparation to invade Iraq. The hawks believed that opposition to U.S. actions will be largely verbal. Wallerstein argued against the invasion of Iraq and the interpretations of the hawks which will only contribute to the United States decline, transforming a gradual descent into a rapid and turbulent fall. He states that the issue is not whether U.S. hegemony will continue to decline over the decade 2002-2012 “but whether the U.S. can devise a way to descend gracefully, with minimum damage to the world and to itself” (P.68).

Major events which have followed the publication of this article are:

- The invasion of Iraq took place in 2003
- The financial crisis and meltdown starting 2007
- The demise of the hawks and neoconservative domination of the U.S. administration
- The election of the first U.S. President from a minority group

The United States, however, remains the uni polar of the system and I believe that it will remain so at least until the middle of this century. Therefore, Wallerstein may have been too pessimistic in 2002 or he was trying so strongly to advice against the pending invasion of Iraq by emphasizing the decline of the U.S. as a decisive power.

The invasion of Iraq has been used as a case study in some perspectives of IR theory, i.e. Marxism and critical theory; and constructivism. The sanctions regime which was applied on Iraq for 13 years provided strong supporting arguments for feminist and gender IR scholars. A brief note on the impact of the invasion on IR theories may deepen our understanding of this critical, and now historical, event.

### **The Invasion of Iraq: Alternative Explanations**

In March 2003, the USA, the UK, and a group of junior partners invaded and occupied Iraq. The Bush administration associated the invasion of Iraq with its declared, since September 11, 2001, 'War on Terror'. Mark Rupert, in an excellent case study, used the dialectical approach to explanation associated with Marxism and critical theory to provide a rationale for this move toward overt imperialism (Rupert, 2009, 170). He recognizes that "while it may not be possible to deductively derive recent U.S. imperial adventures from an essential underlying logic of capital, it is possible – and arguably necessary – to contextualize this episode in terms of the historical structures of Fordist capitalism and the U.S. geopolitical project of economic security and military supremacy which has been its historical correlate" (Rupert, 173). Therefore, contrary to Wallenstein

who thought the invasion was optional, the critical approach interpretation indicates that the invasion was inevitable.

Capitalism is a system of accumulation without limits driven by the compulsions of relentless market competition. "The structural contours of capitalist modernity, then, involve a system of territorially limited political authority and flows of economic activity which are not similarly limited" (Rupert, 171). This structure represents a condition of possibility for imperialism as well as systems of global hegemonic power. The structures of capitalist modernity are continuously reproduced, challenged or changed by human agents under particular historical conditions (Rupert, 171).

The U.S. global strategy after the Second World War had two objectives to contain the power of the Soviet Union; and to create a world hospitable to the growth of U.S. centered capitalism. The military-industrial complex and mass consumerism became embedded together in the historical structures of the U.S. state-society complex (Rupert, 172). Protecting the free World was, according to this strategic vision, closely related to the promotion of vigorous US-centered capitalist World economy. This World view appeared to justify the U.S. interventions in order to "counter political forces which might inhibit the growth of U.S.dominated global capitalism and support those forces favorably inclined toward such a geopolitical project" (Rupert, 172).

The invasion of Iraq, under the guise of the War on Terror, need to be interpreted in the light of the prevailing global economic ideology and geopolitics. Building on a

position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence- a unipolar condition to which Bush referred as a "a balance of power that favors freedom" and thus "the United States will use this moment of opportunity to extend the benefits of freedom across the globe. We will actively work to bring hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the globe." (As quoted by Rupert from White House Papers) Therefore, Saddam Hussein challenge to the U.S. global supremacy in a region of enormous strategic significance, made his removal and the invasion a high priority. Iraq has oil reserves which are second only to those of Saudi Arabia and therefore U.S. dominance in Iraq promises reliable source of supply as well as considerable leverage over the oil market.

William Clark, in an article published in January 2003 before the invasion of Iraq points to another important factor for the upcoming war. He states that the upcoming war in Iraq is mostly about how the ruling class at Langley and the Bush/Cheney administration view hydrocarbons at the strategical level, and the spoken but overarching macroeconomic threats to the U.S. dollar from the euro. The real reason for this upcoming war is this administration's goal of preventing further OPEC momentum towards the euro as an oil transaction currency standard. However, in order to pre-empt OPEC, they need to gain strategical control of Iraq along with its second largest proven oil reserves" (Clark, 2003, 1).

Robert Fisk reflecting in the British Independent newspaper on the demise of the dollar stated that "Bankers remember, of course, what happened to the last Middle East

oil producer to sell its oil in euros rather than dollars. A few months after Saddam Hussein trumpeted his decision, the Americans and British invaded Iraq.” (October 6, 2009, 2)

Constructivism as an approach in IR is based on the general notion that international relations are socially constructed. Three main themes are highlighted: (Fierke, 2009, 179-180)

- The idea of social construction suggest difference across context rather than a single objective reality
- The social dimensions of international relations which emphasize the importance of norms, rules, and language
- International politics is a world of our making which is far from being an objective reality. States and other actors do not merely react as rational individuals but interact in a meaningful world.

Fierke following the constructivism approach take the question about the cause of the U.S. invasion. However, as we can not identify the ‘true’ cause or intention, we are left only with various interpretations. The question can be asked focusing less on the ultimate truth and more on the social fact that the invasion happened and how it became possible – “The ‘how possible’ question reveals the importance of public language and the intentionality embedded in it. The reason for the invasion of Iraq, given by foreign policy elites, was the threat posed by Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction. Whether these actors believed the intelligence or manufactured it, this ‘reason’ made the

invasion possible” (Fierke, 189). This reason was publicly accessible in political language. It constituted an action and a ‘reality’, that is the invasion.

The intention to invade was embedded in these language games and in the act of invasion itself” (Fierke, 189). Therefore, any speech act opens a space for the other to be engaged and respond. As a two way relationship this interaction is dependent on some degree of common language which incorporates standards of legitimacy. As such, a constructivist analysis of the war on Iraq opens for greater reflexivity on both sides of the conflict.

At the end of the First Gulf War in 1991, the UN imposed a strict regime of sanctions on Iraq, which lasted for 13 years. It was one of history’s longest sanctions regimes and it caused a humanitarian disaster. IR feminists look at the economic sanctions on Iraq as a war on the most vulnerable citizens of the country: low income people, women, children, and the elderly. Economic sanctions against Iraq are considered by feminists as constituting both physical and structural violence.

Tickner and Sjoberg (2009, 207-209) suggest the following three insights which the feminists contribute to the study of sanctions:

- Where the women are in sanctions regimes – women are disproportionately affected by comprehensive sanctions;
- The gendered logic of the policy choice and the gendered impact of sanctions
- A critical re-examination of the question of responsibility. Feminists not only look for the problems, they also look for solutions.

In sum, “the sanctions regime on Iraq contributed to the perpetuation of a violent international system in which the most vulnerable people are rarely secure. The feminist insights from the study of economic sanctions as war in international relations are not only valuable for their contributions to IR theories of sanctions, but also for their generalizability to IR’s crucial questions, such as what constitutes foreign policy, what counts as war, and how war affects people” (Tickner and Sjoberg, 209).

### **The Financial Crisis**

The invasion of Iraq, as a military campaign, will go down in history as an outstanding triumph. However, the human and financial costs were considerable. “In retrospect, it would turn out to be the point at which American Emporium began sliding downwards” (Hiro, 2009, 52). The Bush administration fiscal policies of funding two wars while cutting taxes, has turned the U.S. into the biggest debtor on earth and increasingly dependent on foreign countries to close its fiscal gap. This was quite a change for the U.S. which was the world’s biggest creditor a few decades earlier. Moreover, the U.S. financial power received a severe blow in August 2007 when the sub-prime mortgage crisis hit the markets. It started a process that shook the foundations of American style capitalism on a scale not seen since the Great Depression of 1929. The financial meltdown engulfed the globe by September 2008 causing the sharpest and widest economic collapse in living memory” (Hiro, 62-63).

The financial crisis has caused unemployment in the U.S. to reach unprecedented levels. This contributed significantly to the economic inequality which is increasing over

the past three decades. In a recent essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Packer considers that “inequality corrodes trust among fellow citizens, making it seem as if the game is rigged. Inequality provokes a generalized anger that finds targets where it can – immigrants, foreign countries, American elites, government in all forms – and it rewards demagogues while discrediting reformers. Inequality saps the will to conceive of ambitious solutions to large collective problems, because those problems no longer seem very collective. Inequality undermined democracy” (Packer, December 2011, 31). Therefore, the economic problem – growth and equity has been the fundamental challenge facing the U.S. since 2007.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to the Wallerstein theme the Eagle has not crash landed. It is still flying despite the considerable turbulences of the past decade. It is still the unipolar and other states aspiring to be polars, e.g. China, Russia, and the EU still have along way to go. Eventually, the Eagle will have to land but it will be a soft landing over a very long period influenced mostly by domestic considerations. I would argue that the economic problem, particularly the equity issue, will have a very negative effect on the American spirit which is one of the most important assets of the U.S. The accelerated landing, if it occurs, will be the result of that factor.

The invasion of Iraq has been a controversial subject and will remain as such. However, the invasion of Iraq has made that country a Periphery nation, using the terminology presented by Galtung in his brilliant essay on the structural theory of

imperialism. According to this analysis, the world consists of Center and Periphery nations; and each nation, in turn, has its centers and periphery. “Imperialism is a relation between a Center and a Periphery nation so that

“(1) There is harmony of interest between the center in the Center nation and the center in the Periphery nation,”

“(2) There is more disharmony of interest within the Periphery nation than within the Center nations,”

“(3) There is disharmony of interest between the periphery in the Center nation and the periphery in the Periphery nation.” (Galtung, 1971, 83).

This conversion of Iraq into a Periphery nation could not have been achieved without the complete destruction of the political and economic system of the old regime. This could have been done only by invasion and occupation.



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