

BALANCING AMERICA
By Andrei Miroiu

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BALANCING AMERICA

Andrei Miroiu¹

It has become a common feature for any article analyzing the power position of the United States in the contemporary international system to start with a stereotypical phrase like: the U.S.A. is unmatched by any other international actor of the time. The purpose of this article is to provide a different interpretation. Indeed, there is no international actor capable of balancing American power at the world` s scale. But there are quite a few great powers or possible coalitions between great powers that can, at any given moment, balance its power in specific regions of security which I prefer to call “international subsystems”. Therefore, even though American grand strategy can be a hegemonic one on the global stage, in international subsystem its policy will have to rely on subtle balance of power mechanisms in order to preserve the current equilibrium. The article has three parts. The first one is an assessment of the current power position of the United States and will generally accommodate with the general assumption that the current international system is unipolar. The second will identify and discuss the areas where its power is or could be balanced. The third part will consist of conclusions and predictions related to the course of events in case some policies are adopted by the leaders in Washington and others are not.

“La belle époque” of American unipolarism

The world spent more than a decade after the collapse of bipolarism in relative tranquility and peace. The only superpower left understood to guarantee the stability of the system by diplomacy (Dayton, NATO-Russia Council) or by military means (Gulf War I, Kosovo). It pursued some sort of a hegemonic policy of English style, based on cashing the benefits of peace while committing relative few resources on its political and military dominance (Gilpin 2000). America prevented the emergence of peer competitors by all the means of its disposal, but especially through its ring of alliances (in the case of Europe, more specific Germany and Japan) and the economic relations (Russia and China). Minor and major powers, except for those caught in the “new wars” of the 1990` s (Kaldor 1999) free-rode America from a military and security point of view. Throughout the last decade of the 20th century scholars and policy makers strived on formulating a strategy that America would pursue in order to preserve its unique power position. Most of the writings went in tone with the policy. Indeed, as most writers suggested (Krauthammer 1990-1991, Layne 1993, Wohlforth 1999), the U.S. prevented the emergence of other world powers through the means described above. Despite the suggestion of some high-profile scholars, the American leadership saw no real advantage in withdrawing its forces from Europe or from north-east Asia and in arming with nuclear weapons some of its closest allies (Mearsheimer 1990). In the mean time, although its view was largely turned on internal affairs, like health care, education bonuses, economic growth and the dissemination of the Internet, the administration in Washington, whether it was Democrat or Republican, stressed the importance of keeping the pace in military spending. Indeed, although modest by the standards of the Cold War or of the War

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

against Terror, the spending reached levels of 270 billion \$ per year, more than six times the figure of the following great power. All in all, the American military force that walked in the third millennia was strong enough (O` Hanlon 2003).

By the time the presumed World War IV begun on 11th September 2001 nobody was in any position to question America`s preeminence on the world`s stage. 9/11 turned the world back towards power politics and towards searching for security through military means. The world`s sole superpower and arguably the other great powers turned again towards policies aimed at achieving more power (Mearsheimer 2003). Through “coalitions of the willing” (a term that stands for ad-hoc alliances) rather than its established political and military alliances, the U.S.A. fought two regional wars and bullied at least three rogue states, some of them into submission (Libya, Syria and Iran). The general impression left by this policies is that American politics turned towards imperial dominance and it would be impossible and foolish to try to oppose it (Ikenberry 2002, Nye 2003, Cohen 2004). All balancing tendencies stressed by some analysts (like Bazhanov 2003) are dangerous and futile (National Security Strategy of the U.S.A. September 2002).

Some analysts claim that the sources of American hegemony are to be found in the military sphere: it dominates the conventional land warfare, it controls the high seas and can control the skies over 15,000 feet (Posen 2003). Although some of these statements are arguable, I will take them as a base for a short exposition of the military means at the disposal of the policy-makers in Washington, based on data found in (The Military Balance 2003-2004, 18-28). As I deal in this article with conventional strategy, all matters related to nuclear warfare will be put aside.

The active armed forces number some 1,427,000 troops and the reserves can at any given moment add to that at least 1,237,000 people in uniform. At least 33 military satellites provide intelligence and guidance to those troops, aiming at “lifting the fog of the battlefield”. The U.S. Army can count on 2 two armored divisions (1st Armored and 1st Cavalry), 3 mechanised divisions (1st, 3rd and 4th Infantry), one mountain division (10th Mountain), 2 light infantry divisions (2nd and 25th Infantry), one air assault division (101st), one airborne division (82nd) and one airborne brigade (173rd), five aviation brigades, 3 armored cavalry regiments, 6 artillery brigades and is forming an unknown number of Stryker brigades. Currently, the infantry goes through a reform process that would place four brigade combat teams under divisional command instead of the current three. To this the Army National Guard adds on mobilization (and some of its units are mobilized as I write for duties in Europe or the Persian Gulf) another 8 divisions (one armored and seven infantry) and another 15 independent brigades. At full mobilization, the Army Reserve would add probably another 12 divisions. The U.S. Navy fields some 400,000 sailors in its two main fleets (Atlantic and Pacific). 54 attack submarines carrying Tomahawk cruise missiles, 12 aircraft carriers (9 Nimitz class, 1 Enterprise, 1 Kitty Hawk and 1 J.F. Kennedy classes) each embarking some 80 attack and reconnaissance aircraft, 27 cruisers, 49 destroyers, 30 frigates and some 40 amphibious vessels form the bulk of the naval forces, without counting the reserves. The Marine Corps, working in close cooperation with the Navy, fields more than 174,400 marines in

three marine divisions and one reserve, helped by some 216 F/A 18A fighter-bombers and 112 AV-8B bombers. The U.S. Air Force enlists some 367,600 troops and fields more than 55 fighter, reconnaissance and bomber squadrons with some 5000 aircraft. This very short enumeration did not even stress the quality of training and equipment that puts a large distance between these forces and any other armies in the world. But I think that we can grasp the general view related to the raw power that America can muster.

Balancing the Giant

Indeed, reading the lines above one can ask how can someone even think of the possibility of balancing the American power? My answer will be the following: we cannot think yet of a power or even a combination of powers that could balance the U.S. on the world's stage. But its power is, can and probably will be balanced in some regions of the world by other great powers or coalitions between them. America embarked during the last few years on a general trend known in international relations theory as "imperial overstretch" (Kennedy 1990). This generally means that a hegemonic power that turns its political domination into imperial domination will tend to spend of defense more than the economic benefits thus obtained. This will lead to long time economic decline, which will turn into the inability to preserve the military muscle to rule the system. It is not clear if this is the case up to now. What is clear is that America spends on defense some 565 billion \$ per annum and that its forces are so thinly stretched that mobilization of reserves and calls for increasing the number of regular troops and even the reintroduction of draft already appeared in some political circles in Washington. No other moment is better suited for powers that want to grow on the world stage to try to balance the power of the United States.

Indeed, there are regions where this power is already balanced. Even though Russia and America formed some sort of informal alliance sometime in 2001 (Miroiu 2002, Lorrain 2003), the Kremlin actively balances the power in regions of close interest. For instance, Russia obtained the withdrawal of a NATO squadron that was to be installed in the Baltic states immediately after their admission to NATO in the spring of 2004. The Kremlin thwarts the American efforts through OSCE to solve the problems in the Trans-Dniester separatist region. Moscow balances the pro-American government in Tbilissi by using against them the pro-Russian republic of Southern Ossetia. In Central Asia, American bases in Kyrgystan are immediately followed by new Russian settlements in the region. Therefore, the post-soviet republics are the stage of a balance of power politics between Russia and the United States (Socor 2004).

Northern and South-Eastern Asia fall into the same category. The entire Korean problem is hardly to be seen as a conflict between the hegemonic power and a rogue state (Fulop 2004), but rather as a region where four great powers (U.S.A., Japan, China and Russia) and two minor powers (Northern and Southern Korea) clash in the game of power. After the crisis of 1995-1996, the South China Sea and the problem of Taiwan falls in the same category, of an international subsystem where American power is balanced by the rising Chinese (Department of Defense Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2004). An even more pressing problem would

be a crisis arising in the straits of Malacca, where America would be confronted with four strong navies (Chinese, Thai, Indonesian and Indian), two of them armed with modern aircraft carriers (India and Thailand). This last example falls in the general realm of relations between America and the rising power of India, which recently claimed that the seas between the Persian Gulf and Singapore are areas of particular security significance for it. India embarked on an arms race directed not only against Pakistan and China (which it tames through its strong aviation and rising nuclear force), but also aiming at establishing some sort of maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean. Indeed, India already has two aircraft carriers and rumors run claiming that it intends to build another three (www.globalsecurity.org).

Yet the toughest challenge towards American power might not come from the balancing tendencies of Russia, China or India. Its nightmare would be an anti-American coalition involving the great powers of central Europe and probably Russia. Indeed, it is highly likely for the time being that the European Union will not act as a single international actor for a decade or so. When this will be accomplished, a second superpower, with interests and capabilities ranging from the Falklands to Hong Kong will arise. Probably this will not be the case for the following decade, but there are subsequent dangers that could arise in the area. In the first three months of 2003 a proto-alliance aimed at balancing American policy in the Middle East was formed by Paris, Berlin and Moscow. This alliance failed because the U.S. reacted with all diplomatic and economic means at its disposal. But there is no guarantee that this tendency will not repeat itself, as the lust for power (or for *grandeur*, in one case) might haunt those former world powers in the years to come. If they will meet a U.S. with forces stretched in the entire “arc of instability” that runs from Morocco to Kashmir and with an economy struggling hard to maintain a high level of military expense, their policy might work. If such an alliance is to form itself, the consequences for American power will be dire: its forces will be expelled from central Europe; it will face powers that could balance its power and plans for the Middle East; it could find itself with a competitor in controlling the sea-lines in the Mediterranean Sea; one of its closest allies, Israel, might be pressed into compelling with the U.N. and Hague resolutions and rulings; its economic interests in Europe and the Caucasus are to be deeply affected. If this alliance is to enroll also Turkey in its designs for the Middle East, the position of the U.S. would be even worse, but such an event is really hypothetical.

Conclusion: a hard time for America

This article attempted to demonstrate the following:

- there is no power able to balance the United States on the world` s scale. On the foreseeable future no such power will arise, unless the European Union distances itself from the U.S., defines itself as a state and starts spending more on defense, especially on its power-projection capabilities;
- there are a few great and regional powers that already balance the U.S. in regions like the former republics of the U.S.S.R., Northern and South-Eastern Asia;

- it is at least possible, if not probable, that balancing alliances between powers in central and Eastern Europe will form, and those alliances would pose the greatest conventional challenge towards American power.

What policies are to be followed? First of all, it seems clear that America defined itself as an assertive world-hegemonic power. Therefore, up to the point when its power will dwindle, no American policy-maker would agree, in a Kissinger-manner, to a world balance of power policy, as some authors suggest (Schwarz and Layne 2002). America will pursue a policy of world domination, based on economic, cultural and military might, will punish those who oppose it through diplomacy or sword, probably under an umbrella of local “partnerships” (Powell 2004). It will accommodate with balancing tendencies only where its opposing power can threaten it with weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons. On the long term, it will follow the fate of the hegemonic, declining into the ranks of a normal great power. Yet this process will last for decades, as its economy and society still provide enough means to preserve its diplomatic and military muscle. And, as long as America remains committed towards spreading democracy and free-market economy throughout the globe, we should probably be grateful that this is the hegemonic power that will rule the international system for the most part of our biological lives.

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