

Globalization and US Empire: Moments in the Forging of the Global Turn

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An analysis of historical and contemporary patterns of interaction between globalization, imperial structures, and US political preferences in the post-World War II era is the focus of my research. I argue that present-day globalization is the result of orchestrated political developments and can be conceived as progressing along stages and dimensions connected by relatively few pivotal turning-points, resulting in a situation where the inter-state system is increasingly being dominated by a global order under US auspices. I begin with a crucial, but often underrated or ignored historical moment.

The setting is Hofdi House, outside of Reykjavik, Iceland, 11 and 12 October 1986. The weekend is cold, windy, and rainy — the atmosphere bleak at a residence with a reputation for being haunted. The protagonists are the heads of the two rival superpowers, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. The occasion is a seemingly modest, informal, and haphazardly planned "pre-summit meeting" between the two leaders to discuss relations between their countries, especially the state of the nuclear arms race, and to prepare for a proper summit meeting later. In spite of the meeting's failure to produce any agreement, it should be regarded as the pivotal moment in the superpower confrontation that we usually refer to as the Cold War — and in the efforts of the United States to overcome the last constraints of bipolarity for its global hegemonic ambitions and fully harness globalization to American imperial sovereignty. This seemingly inconsequential and in many ways unsuccessful two-day encounter between the heads of state in fact contains and condenses the past history of salient conflicts between the two superpowers' "incommensurable systems" (Henry Kissinger) in an almost ideal-type way. It also points ahead toward their final resolution in the form of Soviet capitulation to the interests and power of the United States some years later. As Jack Matlock, US Ambassador to the Soviet Union between 1988 and 1991, has astutely noted: "Reykjavik was the hinge summit; it was a breakthrough — probably the most important summit we had. What was decided there ... eventually became the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF)] treaties. So to look at it as a failure is to look at it in a very superficial way"

The prudence of observing an analytical distinction between globalization and empire should not obscure the reality of their very substantial overlap in this age of totalizing globalization. Latter-day global structures must primarily be seen as results of more or less felicitous political engineering by representatives of American political preferences, which have consistently been aimed toward harnessing, shaping, and reconstituting the international order for their own neo-imperial purposes. They have astutely taken account of factual conditions at different junctures, pragmatically forging new "doctrines" and instruments along the way, and repeatedly breaking down or sidestepping obstacles and constraints. For that reason, globalization today bears the indelible imprint of the American imperial steamroller of the twentieth century, is largely the product of more or less liberal ideologies, preferences, and practices on the part of America — with all the paradoxes and contradictions this entails.

The Reykjavik encounter illustrates this contention. It crystallizes — into one moment and one place, suspended between the two hemispheres while unequivocally belonging to the American (Keflavik Airbase being sufficient evidence) — all the systematic, pragmatic endeavours of the United States to achieve global supremacy and all the illusory politics of the USSR of catching up with and being recognized by its ideological adversary. This *moment* points irrevocably forward toward the pivotal *turning point*, 1990, and the abdication of the Soviet Union from the aspirations it once harboured about (equal) superpower status.

This means that contemporary "unipolarity" cannot be divorced from the factual structure of globalization, nor from American imperial design, which has proved itself adept at "dispensing with all sentimentality," as George Kennan, the father of the containment doctrine, put it in 1948. For the same reason, it is very unsentimental about the means it uses to achieve objectives, even when it implies different attitudes to the same political values. Where Kennan thought that the maintenance of American prosperity and supremacy meant ceasing to "think about human rights, the raising of living standards and democratisation," these standards are currently being widely, albeit selectively, deployed as key instruments legitimating the advances of US interests on a global scale.

Until recently (9/11), this line of reasoning would most likely either have been rejected by most scholars of international relations, or would at best have been accepted as regards the 1945-1971 period only. I argue that America has pursued a consistent neo-imperial line of policy and action since the Bretton Woods agreement in 1944 and the end of World War II, and that the institutions, commitments, and instruments put in place in the early post-war days are as explicable in terms of American policy goals as, for instance, the formal abandonment of Bretton Woods in the early 1970s or the unilateralism of American foreign policy after 9/11. But this line of argument also holds that it is primarily the interaction of such continuity of purpose and shifts of instruments that has produced the globalization we factually take account of when we discuss such issues. This is what globalization in its contemporary phase is primarily about: not *à la carte*, but *à l'Américaine*.

This carefully prepared process of transforming the relationship between the relative symmetries of the international order into the more conspicuous asymmetries of the global condition has taken the form of overcoming obstacles to and forging connections between the freedom of "dollar diplomacy" (decisive moment: the abandonment of the gold standard, 1971); military predominance (decisive moment: Reykjavik, 1986); and ideological and cultural hegemony (decisive moment: 9/11, 2001). This makes for a current situation full of tensions and paradoxes.

By the late 1990s, the American project of harnessing globalization to the sovereignty of American empire had been considerably advanced. The major building blocks were in place as regards supremacy in the soft area of the "invisible hand" of the market and the US currency, and also that of hard military power. The latter in turn engendered the vision of military "full spectrum dominance" on land, on the seas, in the air, and in space, formulated during Clinton's second term. Remaining limitations to the full conflation of American empire and global structures were related to the cultural problem of ideological and normative hegemony on a global scale. However, there are important differences and tensions among the three different "levels" of American imperial objectives — economic-financial, political-military, and cultural-normative.

The first two (and the synergetic link between them) have reached the point where there is little doubt that the United States is globally dominant. The question of cultural-normative domination, on the other hand, plays out according to a different logic and is much harder to achieve, as earlier and more formal empires have found at more modest scales. Ideational hegemony cannot be politically

ordered, imposed, or manipulated at will. It challenges deeply held beliefs in the benefits of ethnic, national, and local cultural autonomy, which are a direct product of the international order and increasingly work as compensation for the dramatic changes this order is undergoing.

This is why the present phase of overcoming cultural resistance against the American empire represents, if not the most important, certainly in many ways the toughest test for American global power. It is a process replete with contradictions, setbacks, partial victories, and perhaps even retreat; a process whose finality is questionable; and a process providing more plausible ground for theories of "imperial overstretch" than those currently so popular in much international relations and globalization literature, which often build their case on doubtful historical analogies and fail to take both structural differences and the capacity of political actors to learn from historical mistakes into account. In other words, the nexus between American empire and globalization is understandable exclusively on its own terms. The point to watch is if the present attempt at an explicitly politicized culture-and-value thrust by America will backfire in a serious way, or if current troubles are just a blip on a larger screen depicting a trajectory of successful hegemony.