

The Decline of Western Hegemony? A Decade in Review

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The Editors

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The last decade may well be counted as one of modern political history's most intriguing. At its beginning we find the events of September 11th 2001; at its end, a near global financial collapse. In the 1990s, we learned all about the realities of living in a 'Unipolar' world dominated by the Washington Consensus. Over the last ten years, we have seen this view lose ground on all fronts and its inherent contradictions multiply to the point of untenability. This rising tide of internal and external opposition has come in a variety of forms, some violent, surprising, and irrational; others perhaps inevitable and others still arguably irreversible. Where once infantile pronouncements on "The End of History" held sway, now we find the re-evaluation, re-positioning and re-entrenchment of economic, social and political realities. Now is the time for review.

Most regrettable perhaps in the events that followed 9/11 was the failure to find and adopt a pragmatic and realistic approach to tackling non-state acts of terror and the changing balance of power. Instead, a new type of war brought into existence - one without a clear aim, outcome or enemy - that imagined an axis of evil and invoked a broad ranging mindset ill suited to the pragmatics of realpolitik. Many of these themes were covered in our previous issue. However, inasmuch as these topics may persist as the foundation for the century to come, they remain under discussion.

In his article *The Social Consequences of the Torture Discourse*, Marcus Schukze examines the tense relationship between the realities of torture and the precarious role academics take on when they seek to address it. He warns that whilst arguments defending torture may be framed as being detached from the act itself, they are nevertheless integral to the wider context in which it occurs. The very fact that so many justifications for prisoner abuse have come to the fore is, he argues, itself a worrying sign of the social crises the war on terror has created.

Meanwhile, Richard Lappin considers the way in which American ideas of wilderness and the frontier shape and are shaped by notions of imperial success or failure overseas in *Confronting the Otherness of Frontier Asia*. For him, narratives in various formats have reflected the confidence of the American psyche as it fluctuates through time. Narratives have always had their purpose in the US as tools of rationalisation and in the tale of Western hegemony and the dangers of external threats film remains perhaps the most dominant medium. Dan Strutt turns our attention to Spielberg's recent re-interpretation of H G Wells' classic novel in *The War of the Worlds: Affect and Trauma*. He insightfully argues that the movie, whilst clearly a dramatic work, may well provide

a more *authentic* account of the events of 9/11 than, say, news reportage, by tapping into its emotional and affective impact. By allowing us to re-experience the event in a safe, mediated way, it perhaps offers the chance for audiences to face their collective trauma and come to terms with it whilst avoiding the imposition of a normalizing, after-the-fact rationalisation.

Yet we must be wary. One would be perhaps too cynical to focus on any one singular narrative of Western dominance and to see such a narrative through the prejudicial tint that sometimes threatens to become pervasive. It would be both arrogant and illusory to embrace or reject such discourses outright. Indeed, parts of the world still aspire to the loftier ideals of what the Occident (potentially) stands for. Turkey, even while rediscovering itself in moderate political Islam, continued to argue that it had an essentially European identity. The context of that discussion is closely examined by James Henderson in *The Case for Turkish Accession to the EU*.

Looking to the developing world, we see additional issues with global political society and its progeny. Diverted by other endeavors, the West lacked the discipline or interest to engage in state-building to the same extent as it invested in destruction (note Afghanistan and Iraq) and perhaps Africa suffered most from the lack of support. Africa may still have been inspired by the transcendental ideals of that most impressive of political exports: democracy, yet the decade of Mandela has long since passed. South Africa lost its way through an autocratic Mbeki presidency, opting instead for the crass populism of Jacob Zuma, whilst the Zimbabwean system was dogged by vote rigging and political impropriety.

In *Kenya's 'Collapse' and its post-election tragedy of the commons*, Viet Bachmann provides an insightful interrogation of the actions of the Kenyan elite following electoral irregularities in 2007 which lead to turmoil across one of Africa's more stable states. By viewing events through the lens of Jared Diamond's theory of Collapse, he offers an unsettling vision of the failure of the democratic process. In particular, he highlights broader lessons about the over-concentration of power in the hands of the elite, the exploitation of systemic inefficiencies leading to resource depletion, and the cynicism apparent in how rulers' attempt to cement their stranglehold on power. Strong parallels can be found in countries of similar economic and social world standing, such as Pakistan, despite notable linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences. It seems then that counties that are yet to fully industrialized - despite their diversity - are similarly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the modern Nation State and its view on the division of powers, both of which are Western imports.

It has been, then, a decade of change. Today, there is greater skepticism about the West's - and specifically the US's leadership than ever before. That shift in world thinking is probably irreversible. Yet much of the wider world continues to admire the political, social and economic freedoms associated with the Occident. The next decade looks to prove critical in deciding the course of this relationship.