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Global Hegemonic Mindset US and Middle East

by NORMAN POLLACK

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Achieving world mastery requires confronting questionable areas, current or potential obstructionism to American dominance, sequentially ordered in an intended systematic pattern of hegemony, except that at present multiple trouble spots have appeared—e.g., Iran, Ukraine, ISIS—that muddy the waters and induce confusion by stretching the US to its limits in maintaining its military power, keeping up domestic responsibilities, and withal, staying within the confines of international law. Even though Behemoth has proven a skilled juggler in the recent past, when the Cold War yielded simple dichotomous solutions, the balls now in the air are proving too much to handle. The breakup of other empires, notably Russia's, has given America greater room to establish and solidify its own, thought at first to be an unmixed blessing, yet now recognized (or dimly appreciated) to be otherwise, the creation of multiple power-centers, i.e., a decentralized global power system pointing to an international standoff entirely unacceptable to US claims of unilateral political-economic-military-ideological leadership in restructuring the world order.

The phrase “world order” is back in vogue, in each era taking on the coloration of geopolitical realities, the expression of the dominant-power configuration, be it, in recent history, the Concert of Powers in the early-to-mid 19th century, the American effort to secure a place in the sun via the Open Door in the latter 19th century, breaking down barriers created by Imperial trade-and-investment restriction, the so-called Imperialism of Free Trade as a newly minted strategy of

hegemony, on into the 20th century and two world wars, the framework of traditional imperialism breaking down, the US, first with Theodore Roosevelt's battleship navy, then, Woodrow Wilson's skilled use of internationalism to maximize the US's financial-commercial advantage abroad in world markets, and at home, government-business interpenetration (e.g., Federal Reserve System, Federal Trade Commission) to further consolidate the economic base initiated by TR's positive encouragement of monopoly (NO, not Teddy the trustbuster), and, the defining step to the present, FDR and the New Deal laying the basis, contingent on the defeat of Hitler, of global venturing outward through international monetary and related conferences, the UN, a purposeful counterweight to the spread of Soviet influence, and the Marshall Plan, America's initial experiment on a grand scale—with strings attached—of liberal humanitarianism.

1950, the Cold War, America on the historical-structural ascendance, free at home from devastation and rubble, Europe struggling to rebuild its industrial base and financial capital, the Soviet Union, suffering the most from the war and engaged in a massive effort at reconstruction, Asia, still on its knees on both sides of the conflict, Japan and China alike near-prostration from a still longer war, and, as the perhaps decisive change, the largely untold story, the breakup of the British Empire and its Imperial Preference System, under sustained pressure by, not simply world events, but the pummeling of the US. The dollar, thank you, Bretton Woods, replaced the pound, as the standard of the international financial system. The stage had been set for the next six decades, a large swath of history, but essential background for where we're at today. America's search for pre-eminence, never abandoned, always burning bright, through alternative strategies from at least the post-Civil War period (and possibly going back to the 1820s and the Monroe Doctrine), illuminates the continuities in foreign policy, with accompanying domestic support, and often to fulfill domestic requirements of industrial development and market penetration, that make intelligible the present-day US global posture. From my angle of vision, Left-of-Center, it is not a pretty picture, lurching toward fascism if not quite there, with foreign overarching domestic policy, militarism its midwife, the offspring a bastardized internationalism as cover for the unilateralism liberated from World War 2, first to face-off against the Soviet Union and then China, as part of preserving capitalism as the viable, yet still not exclusively realized, world system, America at the lead and chief custodian, now, the mopping-up operations to finish the job. Still, Russia and China, their capitalist transformation notwithstanding, in America's crosshairs, even more than ever, not because of the ideological residue of anticommunism, but because of the obstructionism I mentioned: here, we see for the first time, **POWER TRUMPS IDEOLOGY**.

America has become a basket case in world politics. In previous situations of world order, it was not necessary to make transcendent claims of global power. The nation was positioned approximately where it was at, i.e., suited to be, as the sum-total of its political-structural characteristics in relation to the realities of the world system itself, always pushing forward within a crowded global environment of nations themselves possessing hegemonic ambitions. That changed after World War 2, the path steadily clearing for supremacy, at least of the capitalist world, and militarily-economically, the US doing its best to contain the influence of communist nations (at that point, ideology still trumping power-for-its-own-sake) and—with greater success—retard the modernization of Third World nations. Part of the mix was establishing unified regional economies susceptible to and/or beholden to American leadership,

from which military alliance systems flowed as being more easily organized. In fact, the order was usually reversed, NATO preceding the EU, a handy outcome of US military assistance programs, but with the end result the same, the integration of military-economic blocs in which American influence predominated and which would also come to serve as proxy forces aiding and giving political support to American intervention. A lovely, most desirable condition to be in, through much of the remainder of the 20th century, providing the irreducible flooring when, otherwise, America's loathsome engagement in Vietnam, among others, would have diminished its world moral stature and own ideological certainty so necessary to continued military aggrandizement. "Friends and allies" under whatever circumlocution of the moment was like a life raft in a sea of disgrace, as interventions multiplied and the onus of war crimes could be spread over a larger area until no longer noticed. All of this gradually changed, however, as the international system itself proved more unsettling and more challenging. The breakup of the Soviet Union, thought, from the US standpoint, a victory and blessing rolled into one, actually meant Russia's greater integration into the world economy and society, thereby eroding—though not yet fully apparent—America's accomplished dominance, with only one direction to go—down. It is worth repeating: the 21st century has confirmed the existence of a multi-polar international system, no longer governable through US unilateral action, the result of which has added to its planning and policymaking a desperation (witness the stridency of protest and complaint over Ukraine), irrationality (as in the exaggerated use of counterterrorism as a means of restoring America to the pinnacle of power), and even greater proclivity to intervention and the violation of international law.

That's where we're at, mid-September 2014. Nothing at the intermediate level of crisis—Ukraine and ISIS chiefly for today in the spotlight—valued for their own sake as candidates for destruction or even as objects of interest, but rather only as stepping stones to the grand showdown with other world powers, Russia and China, and once free from their interference (if one cares to leap over the threat of nuclear annihilation), control over the character and pace of Third World modernization and accommodative stance of other potential rivals—Brazil, India, Japan. The US does not take its decline lightly, more like an enraged bull startled its boasts of Exceptionalism are questioned, and hence, we find, under Obama, but simmering for quite some time (a third-of-a-century at least), the permanent-war doctrine and capacious force thought sufficient to back it up. With that framework for hopefully stimulating further discussion, let me turn to the immediate setting, events and/or statements surrounding Obama's War Speech, Sept. 10, already textually analyzed in my previous CP article, "Obama's War Address: Flim-Flam Patriotism," Sept. 12-14.

On the eve of the speech it was obvious that the focus was shifting away from Ukraine, the Poroshenko-Putin ceasefire agreement a bitter pill for the US to swallow, hoping as it was that confrontation with Russia would be ongoing, sustained, productive of NATO encroachment on Russia's borders (still possible), a sanctions-offensive of further tightening, and a resulting toughening-up of the EU in hopes of crippling Russia's economy and political standing, so that advancement could take place on other fronts, including military and trade pressures on China and freer hand in the Middle East. ISIS was a soft touch for generating propagandistic mileage, meaning intensifying the branding of terrorism on Hamas so that Israel could postpone

indefinitely peace talks with the Palestinians, shore up the US-supported government in Iraq, and, still for reasons never clarified, depose Assad in Syria. This, before Obama steps to the podium, a setting having not quite the warmth and charm of FDR's "fireside speeches," but only the long corridor signifying White House authority. Obama, not as POTUS but Commander-in-Chief, a role he increasingly relishes. (By the 12th, the designation was semi-officially, "War on ISIS.")

Already on the 10th, the Editorial Board of the New York Times, immediately following the speech (but with sufficient detail to indicate foreknowledge of its contents), is all over the place—praise, caution, implied exhortation to push harder. It began: "By the time President Obama announced the authorization of airstrikes in Syria Wednesday night, he clearly felt that he had little choice militarily or politically [after resisting US involvement against Assad for three years]"—right from the horse's mouth, yet not a word from The Times that Syrian airstrikes could be a violation of international law. The much-vaunted statement that Syria would agree to the bombing turns out to be false because this was only on condition of cooperation with the US, which Obama flatly refused. He moved now, given ISIS gains and the beheadings, because "he had to expand the fight into a perilous new horizon." Granting this, The Times states that "even if discrete military goals are achieved in the short term, the expansion of the American role [wonderful that it admits as much] in that regional conflict carries substantial and unpredictable risks that Americans may not be willing to bear."

Not cancel the operation, instead legitimize it—on the surface a much-needed questioning of Obama's clear abuse of Executive Authority (mine: as in massive surveillance, drone assassination, and ongoing interventions of varying kinds), but accepting the decision itself provided correct forms are used: "That's why this open-ended operation, which Mr. Obama says will take time, demands congressional approval, despite his claim of authority to expand the campaign in Iraq and take the fight to Syria under the Iraq war resolution and the War Powers Resolution." Yes, public opinion polls are with him—but for how long, if there are casualties? Therefore, "Mr. Obama should insist that Congress share responsibility in authorizing the mission." Substantively, The Times is on board, symbolically about where liberal critics are—just keep it legal. Similarly, "Mr. Obama says that military commanders are free to strike if they identify appropriate targets," just don't [mine: for now] go after Assad. "Mr. Obama has said [he] must leave power," a stated goal, but presumably awaiting later action. ISIS comes first, which won't be easy, The Times complains, because of the sad state of the Iraqi army and the Syrian rebels—here the silent wish for ground troops, but not overtly recommended, in light of their inadequacies: "To be effective, American airstrikes need to be followed up by ground troops who can recapture and hold territory against ISIS."

The observation, revealing the critical dimension of those who favor the operation, the Lindsey Grahams of Congress, who want US ground troops, not the measly 475 to be sent thus far, ostensibly for training purposes, shows The Times at its usual though disguised bellicosity, its concern, aside from legality, is the cost involved: "As President Obama moves the nation back onto a war footing, it is also vital to have a cleareyed debate about how expensive that course could be. The Pentagon had a blank check to pay for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The price tag—now more than \$1 trillion—has been a severe burden for the country." Add the need for "an international coalition that includes Arab states, Western allies and the United States Congress,"

and you “have what is crucial to give the American-led operation legitimacy.” All-in-all, a microcosm of the hegemonic mindset in its sophisticated form, duly mindful of the necessity for keeping up appearances.

My New York Times Comment to the editorial, Sept. 11, follows:

Why does international cooperation provide legitimacy for the mission? The entire Iraq war was illegitimate, yet, not called to account, America now continues with airstrikes. To expand airstrikes into Syria is, like with Iraq, to cross borders that we have accused Russia of doing in Ukraine. For the US, air power is the surrogate here for boots on the ground. We violate international law with impunity. Everything about the war with ISIS stinks to high heaven.

Our purpose by announcing its protracted character is to bind future administrations to the doctrine and practice of permanent war. Exactly the procedure followed with the constantly revised hit list sanctioning drone assassination. One does NOT have to defend ISIS to see that it is being used as a paradigm for ongoing intervention, with Russia next and to be followed by China. The formula Obama announced in his speech, “degrade and ultimately destroy,” defines the US global position with respect to all who interfere with our hegemonic claims and aspirations.

The address was so contrived, manipulable, with its shrill patriotic peroration as to deserve the contempt of all peoples—except our own, so bamboozled by the customary rhetoric of patriotism. I wish the Nobel peace prize committee is now wreathing in shame for its utterly poor, unwarranted selection of Obama. America requires war as a shot in the arm for the malaise of consumerism and a nihilist spirit.

Not to be outdone in his warning within enthusiastic approval of the speech and war plan, David Sanger, a leading White House favorite of The Times, writes in an article, “Focus on ISIS Stirs Fears That Efforts to Curb Iran Will Recede,” (Sept. 11), that American policy is becoming scattered, losing its punch and effectiveness, implicitly, its world hegemonic posture damaged by this undue concentration. Far from Sanger’s questioning the posture, simply the current priorities: “President Obama’s decision to engage in a lengthy battle to defeat [ISIS] reorders the global priorities of his final years in office. The mystery is whether it will deprive him of the legacy he had once hoped would define his second term, or enhance it instead.” Perhaps the greater mystery: what legacy, unless one means drone assassination, enhanced CIA and paramilitary operations, purposeful war-tensions directed against China and Russia, all of which Sanger sees fit to ignore. His concern exclusively here is Iran: “Until now, Mr. Obama’s No. 1 priority in the Middle East has been clear: preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.” Then the clincher: “Israeli officials, who by happenstance arrived in Washington this week for their regular ‘strategic dialogue,’ immediately argued that ISIS was a distraction from that priority.” If Iran (a situation similar to Assad in Syria) was on the same side as the US in the fight against ISIS, wouldn’t that therefore give it “leverage to extract concessions from the president”? Yuval Steinitz, just hours before the speech, said that ISIS “is a five-year problem,” while “a nuclear Iran is a 50-year problem, with far greater impact.”

If Sanger is a trusted mouthpiece of the administration, he is also adept at accessing, and reflecting the views of, what might best be termed the shadow government, senior foreign-policy advisers bipartisan in character (as is the main thrust of the policy itself). He takes the Israeli position seriously, including the warning that “the new American operation [against ISIS] would bolster Iran’s ambitions for regional dominance,” and points out that under the Bush administration the “decision to invade Iraq 11 years ago distracted it from many things—notably the war in Afghanistan—and Iran used that time to vastly expand its capacity to produce nuclear fuel.” On the other hand, and here one must credit Sanger for mastering the Arcanum of the foreign policy establishment (that aforementioned shadow government) when he turns the analysis around: “But there is a countertheory as well: that a president who for five years made clear that he was looking for a way out of the bog of the Middle East [simply not true, given his embroilment in Iraq, Israel, Syria, and Iran] may have a chance to re-establish American credibility in the region if the strategy he described on Wednesday [the war speech] is well executed.” A big IF which is unlikely of accomplishment, especially in the terms that Obama described, including coalition-building (the tepid response of Arab governments for ground forces, the fighting ability of the Iraqi army, and continuing ill-will created by US financial and military assistance to Israel, negating chances for a peace settlement), as well as—the highly placed critics’ admonition—taking his eyes off the larger picture.

Richard Haass, a crown prince of the shadow government, states: “If this goes well, and the United States is seen as acting effectively, it could generate political capital. There’s the chance it will be something of an investment in the region. But that is going to require constant rudder checks, to make sure the administration’s broader goals do not go off course.” (Yachtsmen of the world, unite; you have only your mainsail to lose! The utter phoniness of policy discourse—especially when the destruction of human life is involved.) Tom Donilon is one who views Obama as veering off course, and from a Kennan-Kissinger grasp or interpretation of national self-interest, he is right. Obama dissipates the hegemonic vision favored by the real establishment pros—perhaps now a vanishing breed, as specific limited goals takes hold—to the extent that he neglects his Pacific-first strategy. Donilon may be speaking for them: “We inherited a world in which we were overinvested in the Middle East and underinvested in Asia.” Too, of course, in Russia. To be the world hegemonic leader requires taking in the entire world as one’s sphere of dominance.

The “experts” are saying, and Obama concurs (assuming he has ideas of his own), that global supremacy is the margin of safety if America is not to decline economically, and the margin of security, if America is not to be under constant threat of subversion and overthrow, whether communism or terrorism, or a mélange of the two. Here Sanger reproduces faithfully the mindset whose position is currently under challenge by the war on ISIS (as opposed to the inarticulate war jocks in Congress, who simply want to beef up US ground forces in attacking ISIS): “Yet over the past year, there has been a broad sense that the effort [containment of China] has stalled, along with several others. And in his speech on Wednesday, Mr. Obama said nothing about the OPPORTUNITY COST [my caps.] of his strategy. How would he ensure that 60 percent of America’s military might is in the Pacific—the goal the Pentagon has laid out—while ramping up the fight in Iraq and Syria? How would he square that with the commitment he made just a week ago to bolster NATO in Eastern Europe, part of another long-term effort, to contain

Vladimir V. Putin's Russia?" Hiss, boo—both Putin and Russia, particularly in combination, worthy only to be spitted out.

A final word from Sanger, who, wanting to nudge Obama forward, although quite admiring of his record thus far, argues that Obama's "national security team has suggested that the efforts are not mutually exclusive." You can fight China, Russia, and ISIS all at once, perhaps adjusting for different timetables, and up to now the record is splendid: "They note that the Pentagon has maintained a counterterrorism program in Yemen and Somalia,... while the C.I.A. has run a larger operation, under covert-action authorities, against Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban inside Pakistan. Indeed, to be proud of, targeted assassination, CIA-Special Ops units helping with the targeting, and "covert-action authorities," which might not be favored at The Hague. Yet, good, but still not good enough: "But the goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIS requires an effort of a different scale. It goes beyond the 'light footprint' strategy that the president used in his first term, which included hundreds of drone attacks against targets [let's not be squeamish, human targets, vaporized or left as blood spats—but Sanger can't help falling in with the mindset he faithfully presents] in Pakistan and Yemen, a cyberattack on Iran's nuclear facilities, and the use of special forces against pirates, terrorist cells and Osama bin Laden." If this is a light footprint, I'd hate to think of, or be caught in, what a heavy one is like.

My New York Times Comment to the Sanger article, same date, follows:

Always a pleasure to read Sanger, as NYT's favored White House access point, here, a glimpse at what Haass and Donilon are thinking, even Steinitz's sharing of the Israeli perspective. Yes, Sanger is on the right track—misplaced priority diluting fuller US foreign-policy posture: Iran, Russia, China. But I think on the wrong track in not seeing, from Obama's standpoint, the advantages of going after ISIS. ISIS is secondary; rather, the Wednesday night principle, "destroy and ultimately degrade," is part of a twofold strategy: as with drones and a continually revised hit list, bind future administrations to current policy making; fulfill the larger geopolitical vision, that principle in mind, applied first, to Russia, then China, the ongoing effort to degrade, weaken, and perhaps ultimately dismember each of them, to ensure US global hegemony.

Sanger is right; Obama is greedy (spreading military resources too thinly), and full of HUBRIS, the legacy of preserving American unilateral world dominance, politically, economically, militarily, ideologically. Can't be done, not with the rise of a multi-polar international power system. So, yes, the NATO/Ukraine demarche a flop, Pacific-first strategy and TPP, ditto, all leaving the Behemoth floundering in the cause du jour. The speech was pitiful, short on intelligence, long on patriotism, as though the latter could substitute for the former. Obama is becoming a liability to the foreign-policy establishment.

Putting all the US eggs in one basket is leaving a hole in the bottom, the failure of the hoped-for coalition with Arab partners presently failing to materialize. The Middle East, except for Israel, has seen enough of America. Kerry's trip to the region has a forced quality, evident in the demeanors and handshakes of the officials he met. As Anne Barnard and David Kirkpatrick report in their Times article, "Arabs Give Tepid Support to U.S. Fight Against ISIS," (Sept. 12), the US "is back and getting a less than enthusiastic welcome, with leading allies like Egypt, Jordan and Turkey all finding ways on Thursday [Sept. 11] to avoid specific commitments to

President Obama's expanded military campaign against Sunni extremists." Reasons differ, country by country, but they boil down to "increased mistrust" of the US, seeing the bind he's in with respect to Assad, who alone of the nations' leaders is ready unequivocally to fight ISIS, but whom Obama "had already ruled out as a partner for what he described as terrorizing its citizens," which, of course, rebel forces are not guilty of doing. Seeing as well, as King Abdullah of Jordan, saying to Kerry "that the Palestinian cause remains the core of the conflict in the region," which suggests that until that conflict is resolved, there will be ISIS and others like it for some time. And so it went. Obama's words echoed hollow, except in America