“The Emergence of the United States as a Global Power”

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The United States (US) established itself as a great power in the early 20th century. America’s economic dynamism enabled it to become pivotal in both regional and world politics (Brzezinski, 1997: 4). The path was forged through continuous application of US’s growing power; hard and soft alike. America shaped its regional milieu to best serve security and material ends. In the period studied (1898-1918) US foreign policy is characterised by interventionism and the use of military might to further America’s vital interests: security and economic well-being (Art and Waltz, 2004). America also exerted other forms of power. Notably, US gained influence in international diplomacy, swaying global events. To elucidate US’s rise to world-power status, we will focus on specific case-studies, assessing them with the help of the three levels of analysis.

We begin this essay analyzing American economic growth, its sources and its implications for US power and foreign policy. Economic power set the foundations of American power, facilitating leaders to pursue ‘grand’ policies. In this essay we examine how this immense wealth was transformed into great power. Enlightened Presidents and top decision-makers with their visions and strategies were crucial in this crusade to power. McKinley’s shaping of America’s milieu with its positive implications for security and trade were critical starting points. Moreover, Roosevelt’s building of the Panama Canal, his effective defence strategy and his diplomatic achievements were also fundamental. The personal beliefs, values and ideologies of the ruling elite are considered when analyzing these policies. Mahan’s geopolitical suggestions and their influence on policy-making were also decisive (Vevier, 1960: 334). Involvement in WWI established America in a prominent position among world powers. Wilson’s sense of timing, effective planning and successful carrying-out of US participation in WWI propelled America to the top of the world order.

**Economic Growth (1890-1920) and its Implications for America’s Rise to Power**

“Economic dynamism provides the necessary precondition for being a global power.” (Brzezinski, 1997: 23)

Economic expansion was crucial in US’s rise to world-power status. It enabled its leadership to build a powerful nation. Primarily, it financed America’s major defence, the navy. Moreover, through international trade and cooperation, US’s values, beliefs and cultural influences were conveyed (Mead, 2002: 103). Additionally, US’s soft power was crucial in attracting immigrants (Nye, 1990: 170). US’s rising population provided a solid basis for further growth in agriculture and industry. The sources of American wealth, summarized in Kennedy (1989: 312-313), were largely linked to geology and geography. US territory was rich in minerals, oil and auspicious for agriculture. Commodities, industrial and agricultural produce, aided by railways reached efficiently...
America’s domestic market or were traded internationally through, progressively more, US-supervised sea-routes. Kennedy concludes that America’s unique geographical location offered a higher degree of security than European states.

Enlightened individuals from the economic sphere like Carnegie, Morgan, and Rockefeller were fundamental not only in accumulating huge wealth, but also for the technological innovation furthered by their firms (op. cit.). Importantly the politico-economic elites employed wisely their wealth. They invested in Research and Development, built top academic-technological institutions and continuously expanded their firms and Economies-of-Scale. Technological innovation ameliorated production methods, improved infrastructure and enhanced output quality and performance (Abramovitz, 1973: 433). US’s up-and-coming capabilities facilitated decision-makers to undertake projects of significant political and commercial value. Notably, the Panama Canal was built despite the huge challenges-difficulties posed. US also drew international attention through leading innovators like Edison, Bell and the brothers Wright (McDougall, 1997: 102).

Our comparative analysis suggests that US gradually gained an impressive economic lead. In 1900 US concentrated 38% of world’s wealth, 13% more than Britain. By 1914 US produced roughly equal coal as Britain and Germany together, its national income surpassed that of the next four economies combined and, in 1919, overtook Europe as the region possessing the larger economic output (Kennedy, 1987: 257-259, 14). Economic power paved-the-way for other forms of power: soft, latent and hard. Wise utilization of America’s wealth and the strengths it conveyed, allowed US to assume a leading international role.

The Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War in 1898

“The immediate aim of the war was the eviction of the Spanish from Cuba; its long-term implication was catapulting the US into the first rank of world powers.” (Schulzinger, 2008:16)

In 1898 US declared war on Spain and crushed the waning Empire, destroying its fleet outside Santiago harbour in Cuba (op. cit., 18). Clear defence and strategic considerations lay behind the war with Spain. They were largely driven by security maximization and cost-benefit calculations (Mearsheimer, 2001). America was facing a winnable war which would bring gains in terms of influence, security and trade. Additionally, public opinion and Congress largely favoured intervention (LaFeber, 1993: 141). The victory fortified US’s advantageous grip on the Caribbean, building a naval base in Cuba and annexing Puerto Rico (Peceny, 1997: 423). Moreover, it extended US’s influence into the Pacific through the annexation of the Philippines and Guam (Gilderhus, 2003: 134). It also conveyed a strong global message that the US will use military might to repel expansionary attempts in its regional milieu. Furthermore, it
demonstrated the power and effectiveness of America’s new navy which would deter opportunistic states and protect US interests across both oceans.

Washington’s new strategic thinking was principally outcome of Mahan’s naval strategy (Zimmerman, 2002). Mahan emphasized the need for a powerful navy and the creation of “coaling stations” in strategic regions with significance in world trade (Mahan, 1893: 472). Mahan expected these to become areas of great power rivalry (Grenville, 2005: 69). Based on these, McKinley, his administration and especially Roosevelt believed that simultaneous attacks against the Spanish fleet were required in both the Philippines and Cuba (Kennan, 1952: 13). Kennan (op. cit) argues that Roosevelt long felt US ought to take the Philippines. The Philippines were seen as one of the most strategic points in East Asia and the Pacific. The islands of the Caribbean were also important in view of a proposed Trans-Isthmian Canal (Mahan, 1893: 465-466). These would maximize US’s security and trade capabilities.

There was also an important symbolism in expelling Spain from the New World. Spain came first to the region and left last. Therefore, its expulsion signified the end of a circle of colonial rule in the American Continent. Henceforth America was the sole power-centre in the Western Hemisphere (Meernik, 2004: 56). It was a regional strategy with the international message that US must be acknowledged as “world power” (Weitzel, 1927: 120; Schulzinger, 2008: 20).

**America – an Imperial Power with a Global Reach**

Hay’s “Splendid little war” was the easiest labour any nation ever endured in giving birth to an empire. (LaFeber, 1993: 145)

US fought a bloody three-year war to defeat the Filipino insurgents but secured a point of trading and geostrategic importance (op. cit., 164). Controlling the Philippines meant controlling a strategic gateway to China’s market and a vital naval base in Subic Bay (op. cit., 167). It is also crucial to emphasize the instrumental role of US “imperialists”, including Mahan, Roosevelt and Lodge (Schulzinger, 2008: 3). They found a champion in McKinley, whose religious convictions guided his policy of civilizing and Christianizing the Filipino’s (op. cit.). Besides religious drives, parts of the press were also crucial in pushing for the war (please see footnote 6). Customarily wars left the warring parties with large debts. McKinley was instrumental however in planning how to cover as fully as possible the war expenses and escaping debt (op. cit., 145). McKinley importantly avoided practices that would have rendered US dependent, with negative repercussions on its economy.

Following the Teller Amendment, US established a protectorate in Cuba and built “Mahan’s” base in Guantanamo. The naval and military victories were crucial in an
additional way. They created enthusiasm in both public and Congress enabling McKinley to annex Hawaii as a necessary military and naval base en route to Manila and Shanghai (Zimmerman, 2002). Also, Roosevelt deemed that the Philippines, located distantly, would be hard to defend (Grenville, 2005: 72). Therefore, newly-acquired Hawaii increased US’s capacity to defend them. Guam had a similar function, linking Hawaii and the Philippines. In 1899 US divided Samoa with Germany, obtaining the island of Wake (Zimmerman, 2002). An invisible line linked US-Cuba-Hawaii-Wake-Guam-Philippines-China. Mahan’s vision became reality in the Pacific; US commanded considerable influence in this most strategic region.

Hay and the “Open Door” Policy to China

State Secretary Hay originally expressed the “Open Door” policy (DoS, 2009). All great powers maintained physical and commercial presences in China. Hay proposed a fair, universal platform for trading relations based on free market principles (op. cit.). The policy was essential, highlighting the influence of American ideas in international diplomacy. Equally influential was Hay’s message to respect the “territorial and administrative integrity of China”. With his policies towards China, Hay achieved big diplomatic successes without substantive backing of hard power. America helped prevent a possible disintegration of China, setting conditions for advantageous Sino-American relations. Also vitally, Hay’s policy founded the special relationship with the UK (Zimmerman, 2002). Hay’s experience as US’s ambassador in London facilitated the diplomatic successes with Britain. Hay managed to change US’s perception of Britain as its major enemy. He persuaded Roosevelt that Britain held America’s worldview and had shared interests (op. cit.). Most crucially, Hay settled all border and territorial disputes with Britain setting the conditions for a long and stable alliance (op. cit.). US sealed a decisive coalition with the world’s chief colonial power, with positive spillovers to its security and trade.

Roosevelt’s Presidency and the Trans-Isthmian Canal

Roosevelt’s main vision, also advocated by Mahan, was to build a Trans-Isthmian canal (Schulzinger, 2008: 26). In 1900 Hay negotiated a treaty with Britain allowing US to build a neutral and unfortified canal. Crucially, President Roosevelt refused to accept the treaty unless it allowed America to protect the canal with its navy (op. cit.). The second Hay-Pauncefote agreement (1901) granted this. The renegotiated treaty safeguarded US interests in the canal, protecting the investment and allowing it to exercise leverage on regional politics. By 1902 Senate concluded that the canal should be built in Panama (LaFeber, 1993: 192). Colombian Senate’s rejection of the US-offered treaty in 1903, enabled Roosevelt to support and recognise Panama’s independence (Schulzinger, 2008: 28). Roosevelt sent six US battleships, menacing and deterring Colombia from neutralizing Panama’s revolt (op. cit.). Following Panama’s
secession, Hay signed a treaty with Bunau-Varilla granting US “titular sovereignty” over a ten-mile-wide strip (LaFeber, 1993: 194).

The canal, completed in 1914, boosted trade, brought revenue from tolls, and reduced by two-thirds the distance from Puget-Sound to Cuba (Travis and Watkins, 1959: 407). Mahan emphasized that it supplied the navy with means of communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific (op. cit., 408). In parallel, it enabled the US to control more efficiently its dependencies and especially Philippines. Navy’s competence doubled and the supply of raw materials greatly accelerated (op. cit., 408). The canal simultaneously augmented the navy-based US defence capabilities and encouraged-facilitated domestic and international trade. US’s navy could respond to a two-ocean naval warfare more quickly and effectively than ever before (Dalton, 1999: 33). The canal proved significant in supplying US forces overseas in numerous crises (Heinrichs, 1982: 258). Once completed, America gained an unparalleled advantage in terms of naval balance-of-power. Notably, Britain withdrew its naval squadron from the West Indies in tacit recognition of the transfer of regional naval supremacy to the US (Weitzel, 1927: 120-121). The Canal’s importance radiated outward, making America particularly concerned with the stability of the regions around the canal, expanding US’s sphere of influence (Meernik, 2004: 56).

**Theodore Roosevelt’s Deterrence & Diplomacy: Advocate of War, President of Peace**

“Immense armaments are onerous, but by the mutual respect and caution they enforce, they present a cheap alternative, certainly in misery, probably in money, to frequent devastating wars preceding the era of general military preparation.”
(Mahan, 1893: 472)

Roosevelt frequently threatened, intimidated and used the word “war”. However, he generally refrained from actually implementing these threats. His 1901 annual speech cautioned North Americans and Europeans alike (LaFeber, 1993: 195). Nevertheless, he privately hoped that both sides would restrain themselves (op. cit.). This divergence between his public and private statements may explain his (deterrence) strategy (Dalton, 1999: 31). Mahan’s above quote contains elements of such a strategy: building a robust army is an effective and socio-economically beneficial way to avoid war. We would argue that Roosevelt’s “corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine (1904) was more part of this strategy than a desire to wage conflicts (McDougall, 1997: 114). Roosevelt used “extended executive powers” to swiftly pursue preventive rather than aggressive strategies. The “corollary” was essentially an expansion of US’s sphere of influence; US would intervene, if needed, “as a policeman” to protect the interests of American Nations.
The following instances underline Roosevelt’s strategy. In 1902 Roosevelt sent armed forces to Alaska saying he was ready to fight Canada over a border dispute. Without any shots fired, using diplomacy, he won a settling in America’s favour (Dalton, 1999: 33). Moreover, prevention worked in Colombia, winning Panama’s independence without American casualties. In the Dominican Republic Roosevelt used his “corollary” to achieve two ends. Firstly, to protect and expand US commercial interests in the country and the region. Secondly, to pacify the Dominican civil war while obstructing potential foreign interventions. This benefited America’s economy and demonstrated the credibility and determination of its leadership. US would serve as a gendarme and tax-collector in the region (McDougall, 1997: 115). Roosevelt sought an end to foreign interventions like the German in Nicaragua in 1902 (op. cit). Essentially, he declared a US’s “mare nostrum”, extending its sphere of influence, security and economic well-being. In all above mentioned cases, armed forces mainly accompanied diplomatic-political efforts. The Dominican example was an effort to pre-empt unwelcome interventions, while promoting and safeguarding US interests.

In parallel, Roosevelt kept building-up the navy. In 1907, following a war scare with Japan, he sent the new-fangled navy to an around-the-world voyage. Twenty-two first-class battleships (LaFeber, 1993: 207) cruised longer than any navy before (Zimmerman, 2002). This had two important dimensions. It highlighted US’s military reach, emphasizing to Japan and Europe its capacity to defend its interests. This would also contribute in averting hostilities with Japan. Secondly, as Dalton (1999: 32) points out, the cruise enabled Roosevelt to build congressional support for increased naval spending. Consequently, in 1920, the American navy matched the British (Grenville, 2005: 72).

In 1915 Roosevelt advocated preparedness; once prepared for war, US would actually keep conflict away (Dalton, 1999: 34). President Wilson pursued this line in the navy but not in the marines. US power deterred both Japan and European powers from challenging it militarily. All above mentioned incidents could be characterised as part of a rather successful deterrence strategy. This approach reinforced US’s power, furthered American interests, sealed diplomatic victories and averted conflicts. With few exceptions, including the inherited Filipino and Cuban crises, “Hamiltonian” Roosevelt, arguably, refrained from war with positive spillages to US economic growth (Mead, 2002: 124-125).

*The US as a ‘Force for Good’ or Early Attempts for a Leading American Role in International Diplomacy*

US importance in international diplomacy also mounted under Roosevelt. Roosevelt believed fervently in America’s mission; that America’s influence must rise to benefit all those benighted people who weren’t born in America (Hunt, 1987: 126). This was connected to his broader “Progressivist principles”: social-Darwinism, moralism
and nationalism (Schulzinger, 2008: 24-25). It was America’s moral duty to be a force for good in the world and its responsibility to ensure international order. The President dynamically demonstrated America’s diplomatic capacity when he successfully mediated the Russian-Japanese war in 1905. McDougall (1997: 116) stresses its importance in elevating American influence and brokering balance-of-power. The 1905 success was confirmed in the following year, when Germany invited Roosevelt’s mediation over the Morrocan crisis (Schulzinger, 2008: 35). The Algeciras Conference attracted international attention, enhancing US-Roosevelt’s role as peace-broker. This peace-mediation was more collective, promoting international cooperation. Interstate cooperation strengthens ties and promotes peace; in this instance it prevented a Franco-German war. Arguably, US had not only a say but also a sway in global issues. Roosevelt’s mediation achieved both of its aims: maintain the French-British alliance and contain Germany. Roosevelt also pushed for the Second Hague Conference, encouraging amity and the settlement of European disputes (Dalton, 1999: 32). US engagement was crucial as America participated in global decision-making, sharing its distinct intellectual-diplomatic capital with another 43 nations and leading efforts for international prosperity (op. cit). Roosevelt’s Presidency enforced, furthered and, through deterrence, prevention and effective diplomacy, set the conditions for peaceful expansion of US’s power.

**Wilson, WWI and US at the top of the World**

“The ideological offensive led by President Wilson during WWI was the defining moment for the US in the twentieth century.”

(Ambrosius, 2003: 151)

Wilsonianism delayed US’s entrance in WWI. For three-years Wilson tried to negotiate a “peace without victory”. Wilson and the majority in Congress and Senate did not want physical engagement in WWI. He advocated a “just peace”, but the Allies saw no alternative to *total victory* (Kennan, 1952: 63). An important trigger was the *Zimmerman telegram*. Wilson’s ethics and morality were shaken by Germany’s tactics (Stevenson, 2004: 317). The realization that his vision of “peace without victory” and the establishment of a League of Nations are not possible with “militaristic and antidemocratic” Germany led Wilson to support intervention (Kennan, 1952: 67). In April 1917, US declared war on Germany.

The US entered WWI primarily because Germany resumed *unrestricted submarine warfare* which harmed American interests (Stevenson, 2004: 318). Economic and emotional ties to the Allies made the continuation of trade with Britain and France imperative (Clements, 2004: 63). Opposition, led by the nationalists pressed for intervention (Schulzinger, 2008: 63). Moreover, economic lobbies, mainly banks supporting Britain with huge loans, had a stake in Allied victory (op. cit.). For Wilson, WWI was the bitter part of a long-run peacekeeping effort. Victory would signify the end
of all wars, make world safe for democracy, and establish solid foundations for his League of Nations. Diplomacy would become the only means of conflict resolution (McCormick, 2005: 25). Wilson also believed that the war was in its final stages and that America’s participation would lead to a swifter end (op. cit.).

Victory in WWI solidified and exemplified US’s rise to global power status. America was established as a Great Power. The fact that American resources crucially allowed the allies to prevail gave America enormous influence in European and global affairs (Stevenson, 2004: 319). Critically, America was one of the “Big Four” in the Paris Peace Treaties, deciding concurrently the future of Europe and of the rest of the world. The weakening of Germany and Britain accelerated US’s rise to the top of the world order. It increased America’s economic pre-eminence and security. The exhaustion of Germany, Britain and France led to a comparative increase in US’s economic and military reach. The post-war balance-of-power was also auspicious for America. It prevented Germany from becoming Europe’s hegemon and protected America’s allies (Mearsheimer, 2001: 255). Concluding, the waning of the other great powers increased US’s security and dominance in the Western Hemisphere, making it unthinkable for any European power to challenge this.

Conclusion

In conclusion, America’s flamboyant economy was largely behind every policy success. Economic preconditions enabled US to develop further all aspects of power. Economic growth contributed in increasing US’s diplomatic leverage, providing resources for navy-army build-up, building the Panama Canal, expanding trade and enhancing US’s soft power. President’s acted on the basis of their visions, ideas and strategies. These were materialized due to their country’s economic and technological dynamism. In analyzing these points, the three levels of analysis provided crucial explanatory value for US’s rise to global power status.

The effective implementation of Mahan’s naval strategy and deterrence was originally realized under McKinley and Roosevelt. US’s strong navy and its ability to withdraw to newly acquired coaling stations was a contributing factor to America’s rise to power. The strengthening of the alliance with Britain and the closer cooperation with China proved durable. Crucially US’s involvement in WWI restored peace and stability in Europe and protected the Allies. US surfaced as an eminent world power; an economic superpower which commanded substantial leverage in global decision-making.