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Dominance and its Dilemmas

Noam Chomsky

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The past year has been a momentous one in world affairs. In the normal rhythm of political life, the pattern was set in September of 2002, a month marked by several important and closely related events. The most powerful state in history announced a new National Security Strategy, asserting that it will maintain global hegemony permanently: any challenge will be blocked by force, the dimension in which the United States reigns supreme. At the same time, war drums began to beat to mobilize the population for an invasion of Iraq, which would be “the first test [of the doctrine], not the last,” the *New York Times* observed after the invasion, “the petri dish in which this experiment in pre-emptive policy grew.”¹ And the campaign opened for the midterm congressional elections, which would determine whether the administration would be able to carry forward its radical international and domestic agenda.

The basic principles of this new “imperial grand strategy,” as it was aptly termed at once by John Ikenberry, trace back to the early days of World War II and have been reiterated frequently since. Even before the United States entered the war, planners and analysts concluded that in the postwar world it would seek “to hold

¹ David Sanger and Steven Weisman, *New York Times*, 10 April 2003.

unquestioned power,” acting to ensure the “limitation of any exercise of sovereignty” by states that might interfere with its global designs. They outlined “an integrated policy to achieve military and economic supremacy for the United States” in a “Grand Area” to include at a minimum the Western Hemisphere, the former British empire, and the Far East, later extended to as much of Eurasia as possible when it became clear that Germany would be defeated.²

Twenty years later, elder statesman Dean Acheson instructed the American Society of International Law that no “legal issue” arises when the United States responds to a challenge to its “power, position, and prestige.” He was referring specifically to Washington’s post-Bay of Pigs economic warfare against Cuba, but he was surely aware of Kennedy’s terrorist campaign aimed at “regime change,” a significant factor in bringing the world close to nuclear war only a few months earlier and a course of action that was resumed immediately after the Cuban missile crisis was resolved.

A similar doctrine was invoked by the Reagan administration when it rejected World Court jurisdiction over its attack against Nicaragua. State Department Legal Adviser Abraham Sofaer explained that most of the world cannot “be counted on to share our view” and “often opposes the United States on important international questions.” Accordingly, we must “reserve to ourselves the power to determine” which matters fall “essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of the United States”—in this case, the actions that the Court condemned as the “unlawful use of force” against Nicaragua; in lay terms, international terrorism.

Their successors have continued to make it clear that the United States reserves the right to act “unilaterally when necessary,” including “unilateral use of military power” to defend such vital in-

² Memorandum of the War and Peace Studies Project of the Council on Foreign Relations, with State Department participation, 19 October 1940. Laurence Shoup and William Minter, *Imperial Brain Trust* (Monthly Review Press, 1977), 130ff.

by the United States. Europe must not pursue its own independent course based on its Franco-German industrial and financial heartland.

In the tripolar world that was taking shape at that time, these concerns extend to Asia as well. Northeast Asia is now the world’s most dynamic economic region, accounting for almost 30 percent of global GDP (far more than the United States does) and holding about half of global foreign exchange reserves. It is a potentially integrated region with advanced industrial economies and ample resources. All of this raises the threat that it, too, might flirt with challenging the overall framework of order, which the United States is to manage permanently, by force if necessary, Washington has declared.

Violence is a powerful instrument of control, as history demonstrates. But the dilemmas of dominance are not slight.

[8] *Los Angeles Times*, 23 March 2003.

racy for which no precedent comes to mind. One illustration was the distinction between Old and New Europe, the former reviled, the latter hailed for its courage. The criterion was sharp: Old Europe consists of governments that took the same position as the vast majority of their populations; the heroes of New Europe followed orders from Crawford, Texas, disregarding an even larger majority in most cases. Political commentators ranted about disobedient Old Europe and its psychic maladies while Congress descended to low comedy.

At the liberal end of the spectrum, Richard Holbrooke stressed “the very important point” that the population of the eight original members of New Europe is larger than that of Old Europe, which proves that France and Germany are “isolated.” So it does, if we reject the radical left heresy that the public might have some role in a democracy. Thomas Friedman urged that France be removed from permanent membership on the Security Council because it is “in kindergarten” and “does not play well with others.” It follows that the population of New Europe must still be in nursery school, judging by polls.¹²

Anger at Old Europe has much deeper roots than contempt for democracy. The United States has always regarded European unification with some ambivalence because Europe might become an independent force in world affairs. Thus senior diplomat David Bruce was a leading advocate for European unification in the Kennedy years, urging Washington to “treat a uniting Europe as an equal partner”—but following America’s lead. He saw “dangers” if Europe “struck off on its own, seeking to play a role independent of the United States.”¹³ In his “Year of Europe” address 30 years ago, Henry Kissinger advised Europeans to keep to their “regional responsibilities” within the “overall framework of order” managed

¹² Lee Michael Katz, *National Journal*, 8 February 2003. Friedman, *New York Times*, 9 February 2003.

¹³ Frank Costigliola, *Political Science Quarterly* (Spring 1995).

terests as “ensuring uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies and strategic resources.”³

Even this small sample illustrates the narrowness of the planning spectrum. Nevertheless, the alarm bells sounded in September 2002 were justified. Acheson and Sofaer were *describing* policy guidelines, within elite circles. Other cases may be regarded as worldly-wise reiterations of the maxim of Thucydides that “large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must.” In contrast, Cheney-Rumsfeld-Powell and their associates are officially *declaring* an even more extreme policy. They intend to be heard, and took action at once to put the world on notice that they mean what they say.

That is a significant difference.

The imperial grand strategy is based on the assumption that the United States can gain “full spectrum dominance” through military programs that dwarf those of any potential coalition and that have useful side effects. One is to socialize the costs and risks of the private economy of the future, a traditional contribution of military spending and the basis of much of the “new economy.” Another is to contribute to a fiscal train wreck that will, it is presumed, “create powerful pressures to cut federal spending, and thus, perhaps, enable the administration to accomplish its goal of rolling back the New Deal,”⁴ a description of the Reagan program that is now being extended to far more ambitious plans.

As the grand strategy was announced on September 17, the administration “abandoned an international effort to strengthen

³ Dean Acheson, *American Society of International Law Proceedings* 13, 14 (1963); Abraham Sofaer, U.S. Department of State *Current Policy* 769 (December 1985); President Bill Clinton, address to the U.N., 1993; Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Annual Report, 1999.

⁴ Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn* (Hill and Wang, 1986). On Clinton’s contribution see Michael Meeropol, *Surrender: How the Clinton Administration Completed the Reagan Revolution* (University of Michigan Press, 2000; updated 2003).

the Biological Weapons Convention against germ warfare,” advising allies that further discussions would have to be delayed for four years.⁵ A month later, the U.N. Committee on Disarmament adopted a resolution that called for stronger measures to prevent militarization of space, recognizing this to be “a grave danger for international peace and security,” and another that reaffirmed “the 1925 Geneva Protocol prohibiting the use of poisonous gases and bacteriological methods of warfare.” Both passed unanimously, with two abstentions, the United States and Israel. U.S. abstention amounts to a veto: typically, a double veto, banning the events from the news record and from history.

A few weeks later, the Space Command released plans to go beyond U.S. “control” of space for military purposes to “ownership,” which is to be permanent, in accord with the Security Strategy. Ownership of space is “key to our nation’s military effectiveness,” permitting “instant engagement anywhere in the world... A viable prompt global strike capability, whether nuclear or non-nuclear, will allow the United States to rapidly strike high-payoff, difficult-to-defeat targets from stand-off ranges and produce the desired effect ... [and] to provide warfighting commanders the ability to rapidly deny, delay, deceive, disrupt, destroy, exploit and neutralize targets in hours/minutes rather than weeks/days even when U.S. and allied forces have a limited forward presence,”⁶ thus reducing the need for overseas bases that regularly arouse local antagonism.

Similar plans had been outlined in a May 2002 Pentagon planning document, partially leaked, which called for a strategy of “forward deterrence” in which missiles launched from space platforms would be able to carry out almost instant “unwarned attacks.” Military analyst William Arkin comments that “no target on the planet

⁵ Peter Slevin, *Washington Post*, 19 September 2002.

⁶ Air Force Space Command “Strategic Master Plan (SMP) FY04 and Beyond,” 5 November 2002.

As has often happened in the past, the propaganda assault had at least short-term effects. Within weeks, a majority of Americans came to regard Saddam Hussein as an imminent threat to the United States. Soon almost half believed that Iraq was behind the 9/11 terror. Support for the war correlated with these beliefs. The propaganda campaign proved just enough to give the administration a bare majority in the midterm elections, as voters put aside their immediate concerns and huddled under the umbrella of power in fear of the demonic enemy.

Despite its narrow successes, the intensive propaganda campaign left the public unswayed in more fundamental respects. Most continue to prefer U.N. rather than U.S. leadership in international crises, and by two to one prefer that the U.N., rather than the United States, should direct reconstruction in Iraq.¹⁰

When the occupying army failed to discover WMD, the administration’s stance shifted from “absolute certainty” that Iraq possessed WMD to the position that the accusations were “justified by the discovery of equipment that potentially could be used to produce weapons.” Senior officials suggested a “refinement” in the concept of preventive war that entitles the United States to attack “a country that has deadly weapons in mass quantities.” The revision “suggests instead that the administration will act against a hostile regime that has nothing more than the intent and ability to develop [WMD].”¹¹ The bars for resort to force are significantly lowered. This modification of the doctrine of “preventive war” may prove to be the most significant consequence of the collapse of the declared argument for the invasion.

Perhaps the most spectacular propaganda achievement was the lauding of the president’s “vision” to bring democracy to the Middle East in the midst of a display of hatred and contempt for democ-

¹⁰ Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), University of Maryland, 18–22 April 2003.

¹¹ Dana Milbank, *Washington Post*, 1 June 2003. Guy Dinmore and James Harding, *Financial Times*, 3–4 May 2003.

jects. The tyrant escaped unscathed, and his grip on the tortured population was further strengthened by the sanctions regime then imposed by his former allies.

Also easy to suppress are the reasons why Washington returned to supporting Saddam immediately after the Gulf War as he crushed rebellions that might have overthrown him. The chief diplomatic correspondent of the *New York Times* explained that “the best of all worlds” for Washington would be “an iron-fisted Iraqi junta without Saddam Hussein,” but since that goal seems unattainable, we must be satisfied with the second best. The rebels failed because Washington and its allies held that “whatever the sins of the Iraqi leader, he offered the West and the region a better hope for his country’s stability than did those who have suffered his repression.”⁸ All of this is suppressed in the commentary on the mass graves of the victims of Saddam’s U.S.-authorized paroxysm of terror, crimes that are now offered as justification for the war on “moral grounds.”⁹ It was all known in 1991 but ignored for reasons of state: successful rebellion would have left Iraq in the hands of Iraqis.

Within the United States, a reluctant domestic population had to be whipped into a proper war fever, another traditional problem. From early September 2002, grim warnings were issued about the threat Saddam posed to the United States and about his links to al Qaeda, with broad hints that he was involved in the 9/11 attacks. Many of the charges “dangled in front of [the media] failed the laugh test,” the editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Linda Rothstein, commented, “but the more ridiculous [they were], the more the media strove to make wholehearted swallowing of them a test of patriotism.”

⁸ Thomas Friedman, *New York Times*, 7 June 1991. Alan Cowell, *New York Times*, 11 April 1991.

⁹ Thomas Friedman, *New York Times*, 4 June 2003.

or in space would be immune to American attack. The U.S. could strike without warning whenever and wherever a threat was perceived, and it would be protected by missile defenses.” Hypersonic drones would monitor and disrupt targets. Surveillance systems would provide the ability “to track, record and analyze the movement of every vehicle in a foreign city.”⁷ The world is to be left at mercy of U.S. attack at will, without warning or credible pretext. The plans have no remote historical parallel. Even more fanciful ones are under development.

These moves reflect the disdain of the administration for international law and institutions and for arms control measures, dismissed with barely a word in the National Security Strategy. They illustrate a commitment to an extremist version of long-standing doctrine.

Since the mid-1940s, Washington has regarded the Persian Gulf as “a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history”—in Eisenhower’s words, the “most strategically important area of the world” because of its “strategic position and resources.” Control over the region and its resources remains a policy imperative. After taking over a core oil producer, and presumably acquiring its first reliable military bases at the heart of the world’s major energy-producing system, Washington will doubtless be happy to establish an “Arab façade,” to borrow the term of the British during their day in the sun. Formal democracy will be fine, but if history and current practice are any guide, only if it is of the submissive kind tolerated in Washington’s “backyard.”

To fail in this endeavor would take real talent. Even under far less propitious circumstances, military occupations have commonly been successful. It would be hard not to improve on a decade of murderous sanctions that virtually destroyed a

⁷ William Arkin, *Los Angeles Times*, 14 July 2002; Michael Sniffen, Associated Press, 1 July 2003.

society that was, furthermore, in the hands of a vicious tyrant who ranked with others supported by the current incumbents in Washington, including Romania's Ceausescu, to mention only one of an impressive rogues' gallery. Resistance in Iraq would have no meaningful outside support, unlike in Nazi-occupied Europe or Eastern Europe under the Russian yoke, to take recent examples of unusually brutal states that nevertheless assembled an ample array of collaborators and achieved substantial success within their domains.

The new grand strategy authorizes Washington to carry out "preventive war." Whatever the justifications for pre-emptive war may sometimes be, they do not hold for preventive war, particularly as that concept is interpreted by its current enthusiasts: the use of military force to eliminate an invented or imagined threat, so that even the term "preventive" is too charitable. Preventive war is, very simply, the "supreme crime" condemned at Nuremberg.

That is widely understood. As the United States invaded Iraq, Arthur Schlesinger wrote that Bush's grand strategy is "alarmingly similar to the policy that imperial Japan employed at Pearl Harbor, on a date which, as an earlier American president said it would, lives in infamy." FDR was right, he added, "but today it is we Americans who live in infamy." It is no surprise that "the global wave of sympathy that engulfed the United States after 9/11 has given way to a global wave of hatred of American arrogance and militarism" and to the belief that Bush is "a greater threat to peace than Saddam Hussein." [8]

For the political leadership, mostly recycled from more reactionary sectors of the Reagan-Bush I administrations, "the global wave of hatred" is not a particular problem. They want to be feared, not loved. They understand as well as their establishment critics that their actions increase the risk of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and terror. But that too is not a major problem. Higher on the scale of priorities are the goals of establishing global hegemony and implementing their

domestic agenda: dismantling the progressive achievements that have been won by popular struggle over the past century and institutionalizing these radical changes so that recovering them will be no easy task.

It is not enough for a hegemonic power to declare an official policy. It must establish it as a "new norm of international law" by exemplary action. Distinguished commentators may then explain that law is a flexible, living instrument, ensuring that the new norm is available as a guide to action. It is understood that only those with the guns can establish "norms" and modify international law.

The selected target must meet several conditions. It must be defenseless, important enough to be worth the trouble, and an imminent threat to our survival and ultimate evil nature. Iraq qualified on all counts. The first two conditions are obvious. For the third, it suffices to repeat the orations of Bush, Blair, and their colleagues: The dictator "is assembling the world's most dangerous weapons [in order to] dominate, intimidate or attack"; and he "has already used them on whole villages leaving thousands of his own citizens dead, blind or transfigured... If this is not evil then evil has no meaning."

President Bush's eloquent denunciation surely rings true. And those who contributed to enhancing evil should certainly not enjoy impunity: among them, the speaker of these lofty words, his current associates, and those who joined them in the years when they were supporting the man of ultimate evil long after he had committed these terrible crimes and won the war with Iran, with decisive U.S. help. We must continue to support him, the Bush I administration explained, because of our duty to help U.S. exporters.

It is impressive to see how easy it is for political leaders, while recounting the monster's worst crimes, to suppress the crucial words "with our help, because we don't care about such matters." Support shifted to denunciation as soon as their Iraqi friend committed his first authentic crime: disobeying (or perhaps misunderstanding) orders by invading Kuwait. Punishment was severe—for his sub-