

# War, Peace and Hegemony at the Beginning of the 21st Century\*

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Let me begin by thanking The Book Review Literary Trust for inviting me to enjoy the privilege, tonight, of

giving this second lecture in memory of Nikhil Chakravarty. I have a small personal qualification for giving it, for he belonged to that group of my student friends from the 1930s, that remarkable crop of young Indians who became Communists in Britain and were eventually to play a significant part in the political and intellectual life of their country. Among those I knew well were Mohan and Parvati Kumaramangalam, Sonny Gupta, Arun Bose, P.N.Haksar, and Renu Roy who was my introduction to Nikhil himself, who became her husband. All decided to devote their lives to an ideal and a great cause, but in Nikhil's case with unusually clear eyes, perhaps because, though he had experience as a party functionary for some time, he was less open to the self-delusion that is the professional risk of those who are in the frontline of public politics.

He was, by profession and conviction, a journalist. As history tends to remember persons in official positions best, future generations may not appreciate how vital was his contribution to the India of today, personally and through *Mainstream*, which to his honour, he shut down as a protest against Indira Gandhi and Sanjay's aberration, the Emergency. Not least as a pioneer of a sensible solution for Kashmir, he was a man of remarkable intelligence, judgement, integrity and tenderness. He was a man who, as they said in the French Revolution "deserved well of his country". He should be remembered and he should be honoured. The Book Review Trust deserves our thanks for founding this lecture, which will keep his memory before those who did not know a most remarkable man.

My subject is War, Peace and Hegemony, but I will approach present problems in the perspective of the past, as is the practice of historians. We cannot talk about the political future of the world unless we bear in mind that we are living through a period when history, that is to say the process of change in human life and society and the human impact on the global environment, has been accelerating at a dizzying pace. It is now proceeding at a speed which puts the future of both the human race and the natural environment, at risk. When the Berlin Wall fell an incautious American announced the end of history. So I hesitate to use a phrase so patently dis-credited. Nevertheless, in the middle of the last century we suddenly entered a new

phase in world history which has brought to an end history as we have known it in the past 10,000 years, that is to say since the invention of sedentary agriculture. We do not know where we are going.

I tried to sketch the outlines of this dramatic and sudden break in world history in my history of the 'short twentieth century'. The technological and productive transformations are obvious. Think only of the speed of the communications revolutions which has virtually abolished time and distance. The Internet is barely ten years old in 2004. I also singled out four social aspects of it, which are relevant to the international future. These are the dramatic decline and fall of the peasantry, which had until the 19th century formed the great bulk of the human race as well as the foundation of its economy; the corresponding rise of a predominantly urban society, and especially the hyper-cities with populations measured in eight digits; and the replacement of a world of oral communication by a world of universal reading and writing by hand or machine; and finally, the transformation in the situation of women.

The decline and fall of the agricultural part of humanity is obvious in the developed world. Today it amounts to 4% of the occupied population in the OECD—2% in the USA. But it is evident elsewhere. In the mid-1960s there were still five states in Europe with more than half the occupied population in this area,

eleven in the Americas, eighteen in Asia and , with three exceptions, all of Africa (Libya, Tunisia and South Africa). The situation today is dramatically different. For practical purposes no countries with +50% of farmers are left in Europe and the Americas, or indeed in the Islamic world—even Pakistan has fallen below 50%, while Turkey has fallen from a peasant population of three quarters to one third. Even the major fortress of peasant agriculture in Southeast Asia has been breached in several places—Indonesia is down from 67 to 44, the Philippines from 53 to 37, Thailand from 82 to 46, Malaysia from 51 to 18. In fact, omitting most of sub-Saharan Africa, the only solid bastions of peasant society left—say over 60% of the occupied population in 2000—are in the former South Asian empires of Britain and France—India, Bangla Desh, Myanmar, and the Indochinese countries. But, given the acceleration of industrialization, for how long? In the late 1960s the farming population formed half of the population in Taiwan and South Korea: today it is down to 8 and 10% respectively. Within a few decades we will have ceased to be what humanity has been since its emergence, a species whose members are chiefly engaged in gathering, hunting or producing food.

We shall also cease to be an essentially rural species. In 1900 (Bairoch cities 634) only 16% of the world's population lived in towns. In 1950 it had risen to just under 26%, today it is just under half (48%). In the developed countries and many other parts of the globe the countryside, even in the agriculturally productive areas, is a green desert in which human beings are hardly ever visible outside motor-cars and small settlements, until the traveller reaches the nearest town. But here extrapolation becomes more difficult. It is true that the old developed countries are heavily urbanized, but they are no longer typical of current urbanization, which takes the form of a desperate flight from the countryside into what might be called hyper-cities. What is happening to cities in the developed world—even the ones nominally growing—is the suburbanization of growing areas around the original centre or centres. Today, only ten of the world's largest fifty cities are in Europe and North America, and only two of the eighteen world cities of 10 millions and over. The fastest-growing cities over 1 million are, with a single exception (Porto in Portugal), in Asia (20), Africa (6) and Latin America (5). Whatever its other consequences, this dramatically changes the political balance, especially in countries with elected representative assemblies or presidents, between highly *concentrated* urban and geographically *spread-out* rural populations in states, where up to half the population may live in the capital city, though nobody can say exactly how.

I shall say little about the educational transformation, since the social and cultural effects of general literacy cannot easily be separated from the social and cultural effects of the sudden, and utterly unprecedented revolution in the public and personal media of communication in which we are all engaged. Let me note only one significant fact. There are today twenty countries in which more than 55% of the relevant age-groups continue studying after their secondary education. But with a single exception (South Korea) all of them are in Europe (old capitalist and ex-socialist), North America and Australasia. In its capacity to generate human capital the old developed world still retains a substantial advantage over the major newcomers of the twenty-first century. How fast can Asia, and particularly India and China, catch up?

I want to say nothing here about that greatest single social change of the past century, the emancipation of women, except for one observation supplementing what I have just said. The emancipation of women is best indicated by the degree to which they have caught up with or even surpassed the education of men. Need I say in India that there are parts of the world where it is still badly lagging?

## II

Let me, from this bird's eye perspective of the unprecedented transformations of the past half-century or so, descend to a closer view of the factors affecting war, peace and power at the outset of the 21st century. Here general trends are not necessarily guides to practical realities. It is evident, for instance, that in the course of the 20th century the world's population (outside the Americas) ceased to be overwhelmingly ruled, as it were from the top down, by hereditary princes or the agents of foreign power. It now came to live in a collection of technically independent states whose governments claimed legitimacy by reference to 'the people' or 'the nation', in most cases (including even the so-called 'totalitarian' regimes), claiming confirmation by real or bogus elections or plebiscites and/or by periodic mass public ceremonies that symbolized the bond between authority and 'the people'. One way or another people have changed from being

*subjects to citizens*; including, in the twentieth century, not only men but also women. But how close to reality does this get us, even today when most governments have, technically speaking, variants of liberal-democratic constitutions with contested elections, though sometimes suspended by military rule, that is deemed to be temporary, but has often lasted a long time? Not very far.

Nevertheless, one general trend can probably be observed across most of the globe. It is the change in the position of the independent territorial state itself, which in the course of the 20th century became the basic political and institutional unit under which human beings lived. In its original home in the North Atlantic region it was based on *several* innovations made since the French Revolution. It had the monopoly of the means of power and coercion: arms, armed men, prisons. It exercised increasing control by a central authority and its agents of what takes place on the territory of the state, based on a growing capacity to gather information. The scope of its activity and its impact on the daily life of its citizens grew, and so did success in mobilizing its inhabitants on the grounds of their loyalty to state and nation. This phase of state development reached its peak forty years or so ago.

Think, on the one hand, of the 'welfare state' of western Europe in the 1970s in which 'public consumption'—i.e. the share of the GDP used for public purposes and not private consumption or investment—amounted to between roughly 20 and 30% [Economist World]. Think, on the other hand, of the readiness of citizens not only to let public authorities tax them to raise such enormous sums, but actually to be conscripted to fight and die 'for their country' in millions during the great wars of the last century. For more than two centuries, until the 1970s, this rise of the modern state had been continuous, and proceeded irrespective of ideology and political organization—liberal, social democratic, communist or fascist.

This is no longer so. The trend is reversing. We have a rapidly globalizing world economy based on transnational private firms, doing their best to live outside the range of state law and state taxes, which severely limits the ability of even big governments to control their national economies. Indeed, thanks to the prevailing theology of the free market, states are actually abandoning many of their most traditional direct activities—postal services, police, prisons, even important parts of their armed forces—to profit-making private contractors. It has been estimated that 30,000 or more such armed "private contractors" are at present active in Iraq<sup>1</sup>. Thanks to this development and the flooding of the globe with small, but highly effective weaponry during the Cold War, armed force is no longer monopolized by states and their agents. Even strong and stable states like Britain, Spain and India have learned to live for long periods at a time with effectively indestructible, if not actually state-threatening, bodies of armed dissidents. We have seen, for various reasons, the rapid disintegration of numerous member-states of the UN, most but not all of them products of the disintegration of twentieth century empires, in which the nominal governments are unable to administer or exercise actual control over much of state territory, population, or even their own institutions. Actual separatist movements are found even in old states like Spain and Britain.

Almost equally striking is the decline in the acceptance of state legitimacy, of the voluntary acceptance of obligation to ruling authorities and their laws by those who live on their territories, whether as citizens or as subjects. Without the readiness of vast populations, for most of the time, to accept as legitimate any effectively established state power—even that of a comparative handful of foreigners—the era of 19-20th century imperialism would have been impossible. Foreign powers were at a loss only in the rare zones where this was absent, such as Afghanistan and Kurdistan. But, as Iraq demonstrates, the natural obedience of people in the face of power, even of overwhelming military superiority has gone, and with it the return of empires. But it is not only the obedience of subjects but of citizens that is rapidly eroding. I very much doubt whether *any* state today—not the USA, Russia or China—could engage in major wars with conscript armies ready to fight and die 'for their country' to the bitter end. Few western states can any longer rely, as most so-called 'developed countries' once could, on a basically 'law-abiding' and orderly population except for the expected criminal or other fringes on the margins of the social order. The extraordinary rise of technological and other means of keeping the citizens under surveillance at all times (by public cameras, phone-tapping, access to personal data and computers etc.) has not made state and law more effective in these states, though it has made the citizens less free.

All this has been taking place in an era of the dramatically accelerated globalization, that is to say growing regional disparities within the globe. For globalization by its nature produces unbalanced and asymmetric growth. It also underlines the contradiction between those aspects of contemporary life which are subject to globalization and the pressures of global standardization—science and technology, the economy, various technical infrastructures and, to a lesser extent, cultural institutions—and those which are not, notably the state and politics. For instance, globalization logically leads to a growing flow of labour migration from poorer to richer regions, but this produces political and social tension in a number of states affected, mostly in the rich countries of the old North Atlantic region, even though in global terms this movement is modest: even today only 3% of the world's population live outside the country of their birth. Unlike the movement of capital, commodities and communications, states and politics have so far put effective obstacles in the way of labour migrations.

The most striking new imbalance created by economic globalization, apart from the dramatic de-industrialization of the old Soviet and East European socialist economies in the 1990s, is the growing shift of the centre of gravity of the world economy from the region bordering the North Atlantic to parts of Asia. This is still in its early stages, but accelerating. There can be no doubt of the fact that the growth of the world economy in the past 10 years has been pulled along largely by the Asian dynamos, notably the extraordinary rate of growth of industrial production in China—with a 30% rise in 2003 compared with 3% for the world, and less than 0.50% in North America and Germany<sup>2</sup>. Clearly this has not yet greatly changed the relative weight of Asia and the Old North Atlantic—the USA, the European Union and Japan between them continue to represent 70% of the global GDP—but the sheer size of Asia is already making itself felt. In terms of purchasing power South, Southeast and East Asia already represent a market about two thirds larger than the USA. How this global shift will affect the relative strength of the US economy is naturally a question central to the international prospects of the 21st century. I shall return to it below.

### III

Let me now move even closer to the problem of war, peace and the possibility of an international order in the new century. At first sight it would seem that the prospects of world peace must be superior to those of the 20th century, with its unparalleled record of world wars and other forms of death on an astronomic scale. And yet, a recent poll in Great Britain, which compares the answers of Britons in 2004 to questions asked in 1954, reveals that the fear of world war today is actually *greater* than it was then<sup>3</sup>. That fear is largely due to the increasingly evident fact that we live in an era of endemic world-wide armed conflict, typically fought within states, but magnified by foreign intervention<sup>4</sup>. Though small in 20th century *military* terms, the impact of such conflicts on civilians—who have increasingly become their main victims—is relatively enormous, and long-lasting. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall we once again live in an era of genocide and compulsory mass population transfers, as in parts of Africa, southeast Europe, and Asia. It is estimated that at the end of 2003 there were perhaps 38 million refugees inside and outside their own country, which is a figure comparable to the vast numbers of 'displaced persons' in the aftermath of World War II. One simple illustration: in 2000 the number of battle-related deaths in Burma was no more than 200-500, but the number of the 'internally displaced', largely by the activities of the Myanmar army, was about one million<sup>5</sup>. The Iraq war confirms the point. Small wars, by twentieth century standards, produce vast catastrophes.

The typical 20th century form of warfare, that between states, has been declining sharply. At the moment no such traditional inter-state war is taking place, although such conflicts cannot be excluded in various areas of Africa and Asia or where the internal stability or cohesion of existing states is at risk. On the other hand the danger of a major global war, probably arising out of the unwillingness of the USA to accept the emergence of China as a rival super-power, has not receded, although it is not immediate. The chances of avoiding such a conflict sometime are better than the chances of avoiding World War II were after 1929. Nevertheless, such a war remains a real possibility within the next decades.

Even without traditional inter-state wars, small or large, few realistic observers today expect our century to bring a world without the constant presence of arms and violence. However, let us resist the rhetoric of irrational fear with which governments like President Bush's and Prime Minister Blair seek to justify a policy

of global empire. Except as a metaphor, there can be no such thing as a ‘war against terror or terrorism’, but only against particular political actors who use what is a tactic, not a programme. As a tactic terror is indiscriminate, and morally unacceptable, whether used by unofficial groups or states. The International Red Cross recognizes the rising tide of barbarism as it condemns both sides in the Iraq war. There is also much fear that biological killers may be used by small terrorist groups, but, alas, much less fear of the greater but unpredictable dangers, if and when the new ability to manipulate the processes of life, including human life, escapes from control, as it surely will. However, the actual dangers to world stability, or to any *stable* state, from the activities of the pan-islamic terrorist networks against which the USA proclaimed its global war, or for that matter from the sum-total of all the terrorist movements now in action anywhere, are negligible. Though they kill much larger numbers of people than their predecessors—if many fewer than states—the risk to life they present is statistically minimal. For the purpose of military aggression, they hardly count. Unless such groups were to gain access to nuclear weapons, which is not unthinkable, but not an immediate prospect either, terrorism will call for cool heads, not hysteria.

#### IV

And yet, the world disorder is real, and so is the prospect of another century of armed conflict and human calamity. Can this be brought under some kind of global control again, as it was for all but 30 years during the 175 years from Waterloo to the collapse of the USSR? The problem is more difficult today for two reasons. First, the much more rapidly growing inequalities created by the uncontrolled free-market globalization are natural incubators of grievance and instability. It has recently been observed, “Not even the most advanced military establishments could be expected to cope with a general breakdown of legal order”<sup>6</sup>—and the crisis of states to which I referred earlier makes this easier than it once was. And second, there is no longer a plural international great-power system, such as actually was in a position to keep a general collapse into global war at bay, except for the age of catastrophe from 1914 to 1945. This system rested on the presumption, dating back to the treaties ending the 30 years’ war of the 17th century, of a world of states whose relations were governed by rules, notably non-interference in each others’ internal affairs, and on a sharp distinction between war and peace. Neither are any longer valid today. It also rested on the reality of a world of plural power, even in the small ‘first division’ of states, the handful of ‘great powers’, reduced after 1945 to two super-powers. None could prevail absolutely, and (outside much of the western hemisphere) even regional hegemony always proved to be temporary. They had to live together. The end of the USSR and the overwhelming military superiority of the USA have ended this power-system. It has ceased to exist. What is more, US policy since 2002 has denounced both its treaty obligations and the conventions on which the international system was based on the strength of a probably lasting supremacy in high-tech offensive warfare, which has made it the only state capable of major military action in any part of the world at short notice.

The US ideologists and their supporters see this as the opening a new era of world peace and economic growth under a beneficent global American empire, which they compare, wrongly, to the Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century British empire. Wrongly, because historically empires have not created peace and stability in the world around them, as distinct from their own territories. If anything it was the absence of major international conflict that kept them in being, as it did the British Empire. As for the good intentions of conquerors and their beneficent results, they belong to the sphere of imperial rhetoric. Empires have always justified themselves, sometimes quite sincerely, in moral terms—whether they claimed to spread (their version of) civilization or religion to the benighted, or to spread (their version of) freedom to the victims of (someone else’s) oppression or today as champions of human rights. Patently, empires had some positive results. The claim that imperialism brought modern ideas into a backward world, which has no validity today, was not entirely spurious in the 19th century. However the claim that it significantly accelerated the economic growth of the imperial dependencies will not bear much examination, at least outside the areas of European overseas settlement. Between 1820 and 1950 the mean GDP per capita of 12 west-European states multiplied by 4.5, whereas in India and Egypt it barely increased<sup>7</sup> at all. As for democracy, we all know that strong empires kept it at home; only declining ones conceded as little of it as they could.

But the real question is whether the historically unprecedented project of global domination by a single state is possible, and whether the admittedly overwhelming military superiority of the US is adequate to establish, and beyond this to maintain it. The answer to both questions is no. Arms have often established empires, but it takes more than arms to maintain them, as witness the old saw dating back to Napoleon: “You can do anything with bayonets except sit on them.” Especially today, when even overwhelming military force no longer in itself produces tacit acquiescence. Actually, most historic empires have ruled indirectly, through native elites often operating native institutions. When they lose their capacity to win enough friends and collaborators among their subjects, arms are not enough. The French learned that even a million white settlers, an army of occupation of 800,000, and the military defeat of the insurgency by systematic massacre and torture were not enough to keep Algeria French.

But why should we have to ask this question? This brings me to the puzzle with which I want to conclude my lecture. Why did the USA abandon the policies which maintained a real hegemony over the greater part of the globe, namely the non-communist and non-neutralist part, after 1945? Its capacity to exercise this hegemony did not rest on destroying its enemies or forcing its dependencies into line by the direct application of military force. The use of this was then limited by the fear of nuclear suicide. US military power was relevant to the hegemony only insofar as it was seen as preferable to other military powers—that is to say in the Cold War NATO Europe wanted its support against the armed might of the USSR.

The US hegemony of the second half of the last century rested not on bombs but *economically* on the enormous wealth of the USA and the central role its giant economy played in the world, especially in the decades after 1945. *Politically* it rested on a general consensus in the rich North that their societies were preferable to those under communist regimes, and, where there was no such consensus, as in Latin America, on alliances with national ruling elites and armies afraid of social revolution. *Culturally* it rested on the attractions of the affluent consumer society enjoyed and propagated by the USA which had pioneered it and on Hollywood’s world conquest. *Ideologically* the USA undoubtedly benefited as the champion and exemplar of ‘freedom’ against ‘tyranny’, except, in those regions where it was only too obviously allied with the enemies of freedom.

All this could—and indeed did—easily survive the end of the cold war. Why should not others look for leadership to the superpower which represented what most other states now adopted, electoral democracy, to the greatest of economic powers committed to the neo-liberal ideology which was sweeping the globe? Its influence and that of its ideologists and business executives was immense. Its economy, though slowly losing its central role in the world and no longer dominant in industry, or even, since the 1980s, in direct foreign investments<sup>8</sup>, continued to be huge and to generate enormous wealth. Those who conducted its imperial policy had always been careful to cover the reality of US supremacy over its allies in what was a genuine ‘coalition of the willing’ with the emollient cream of tact. They knew that, even after the end of the USSR, the USA was not alone in the world. But they also knew they were playing the global game with cards they had dealt and by rules that favoured them, and that that no rival state of comparable strength and with global interests was likely to emerge. The first Gulf War, genuinely supported by the UN and the international community, and the immediate reaction to 9/11 demonstrated the post-Soviet strength of the US position.

It is the megalomaniac US policy since 9/11 that has very largely destroyed the political and ideological foundations of the former hegemonic influence and left the US with little to reinforce the heritage of the cold war era but an admittedly frightening military power. There is no rationale for it. Probably for the first time in its history, an internationally almost isolated USA is unpopular among most governments and peoples. Military strength underlines the economic vulnerability of a US whose enormous trade deficit is maintained in being by the Asian investors, whose economic interest in supporting a falling dollar is rapidly diminishing. It also underlines the relative economic clout of others: the European Union, Japan, East Asia and even the organized bloc of third world primary producers. In the WTO the USA can no longer negotiate with clients. Indeed, may not the very rhetoric of aggression justified by implausible ‘threats to America’ indicate a basic sense of insecurity about the global future of the USA?

Frankly, I can’t make sense of what has happened in the USA since 9/11 enabled a group of political crazies to realize long-held plans for an unaccompanied solo performance of world supremacy. I believe it

indicates a growing crisis within US society, which finds expression in the most profound political and cultural division within that country since the Civil War, and a sharp geographical division between the globalized economy of the two seabords, and the vast resentful hinterland, the culturally open big cities and the rest. Today, radical rightwing regime seeks to mobilize 'true Americans' against some evil outside force and against a world that does not recognize the uniqueness, the superiority, the manifest destiny of the USA. What we must realize is that American global policy is aimed inwards not outwards, however great and ruinous its impact on the rest of the world. It is not *designed* to produce either empire or effective hegemony. Nor was the Rumsfeld doctrine—quick wars against weak push-overs followed by quick withdrawals—designed for effective global conquest. Not that this makes it less dangerous. On the contrary. As is now evident, it spells instability, unpredictability, aggression and unintended, almost certainly disastrous, consequences. In effect, the most obvious danger of war today arises from the global ambitions of an uncontrollable and apparently irrational government in Washington.

How shall we live in this dangerous, unbalanced, explosive world in the midst of major shifting of the social and political, national and international tectonic plates? If I were talking in London I would warn western liberal thinkers, however profoundly outraged by the deficiencies of human rights in various parts of the world, not to delude themselves into believing that American armed intervention abroad shares their motivation or is likely to bring about the results they would like. I hope this is not necessary in Delhi. As for governments, the best other states can do is to demonstrate the isolation, and therefore the limits of actual US world power by refusing, firmly but politely, to join further initiatives proposed by Washington which might lead to military action, particularly in the Middle East and Eastern Asia. To give the USA the best chance of learning to return from megalomania to rational foreign policy is the most immediate and urgent task of international politics. For whether we like it or not, the USA will remain a superpower, indeed an imperial power, even in what is evidently the era of its relative economic decline. Only, we hope, a less dangerous one.

### Reference:

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- 7 Angus Maddison, *L'économie mondiale 1820-1992. Analyse et Statistiques* (OECD, Paris 1995) pp. 20-1. The figures for Egypt only from 1900.
- 8 In 1980 it was of the order of 40%, in the early 2000s between 22 and 25% UNCTAD [wir\\_outstock\\_en\[1\]](#)