

From Berlin to Baghdad: Competing for Power and Discursive Legitimacy

Joseph A. Camilleri
Professor of International Relations
School of Social Sciences
La Trobe University
Victoria 3086 Australia

Revised text of lecture delivered at Ateneo de Manila University, 11 February 2004

Iraq, Afghanistan, the ‘war on terror’ and much that has happened in the last few years – indeed throughout the post-Cold War era (a label remarkable for what it fails to tell us about the world) – all point to a significant moment of transition. As we reflect on this moment, we are soon struck by the ambiguity of what we see, an almost palpable tension born of uncertainty and contradiction, for what we see is not one but several realities.

Much of our initial exploration will focus on the so-called unipolar moment, that is, on imperial America, or what some have referred to as the ‘imperial tense’.¹ However, the emphasis on the role of US power is simply by way of gaining a foothold on the slippery slope that is the current transitional moment, which, one should hasten to add, has still to run its full course. This is precisely what the phrase ‘from Berlin to Baghdad’, borrowed from Thierry de Montbrial,² is meant to convey. What is at stake is partly a contest for power, between those intent on consolidating the supremacy of the United States and those equally determined to challenge it. But equally important, and not unconnected with it, is the contest of ideas and worldviews – different ways of interpreting the world and laying the foundations of a future world order.

As my point of departure may I take the assessment I offered soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall of the likely course of events in the aftermath of the Cold War.³ The aim was to characterise the new phase of international relations by drawing attention to four possible scenarios or security models, each with a distinctive configuration of power and approach to international security:

Unipolarity: a system resting primarily on the capacity of one state (the United States) to project military power on a global scale, to maintain alliances and build coalitions as the need arose, which the imperial power would use as the basis for the articulation of a ‘new world order’.

Balance of power: a system, in which alliances, to the extent that they survived, would not necessarily reflect the dictates of the imperial power, and coalitions might not fulfil their

¹ Andrew J. Bacevich (ed), *The Imperial Tense: Prospects and Problems of American Empire*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2003.

² Thierry de Montbrial, *Quinze ans qui bouleversèrent le monde : De Berlin à Bagdad*, Paris, Dunod, 2003.

³ Joseph A. Camilleri, “Alliances and Emerging Post-Cold War Security System”, in Richard Leaver and James L. Richardson (eds), *Charting the Post-Cold War Order*, Boulder, Co, Westview Press, 1993, pp. 81-94.

promise – such a system of competing centres of power might be better described as *competitive multipolarity*.

Concert of powers: a system in which the great powers would co-operate on issues of global security – a tendency which the euphoria of the immediate post-Cold War period, coupled with a healthy dose of self-interest, seemed to reinforce – such a system might be labelled *co-operative multipolarity*.

Universal system of security: a system in which notions of collective and common security would have pride of place, in which the UN system generally, and the Security Council in particular, would be able to function with the efficacy which had proved so elusive during the Cold War years. The UN's greater willingness and capacity to undertake peacekeeping operations and the proposals contained in the UN Secretary-General's report (*An Agenda for Peace*)⁴ were perhaps indicative of a universal commitment to multilateral security.

Could any one of these be said to constitute the essential dynamic or inherent logic of the emerging international system?

The validity, however partial or qualified, of each of these four models suggested that each captured only one slice of a complex and rapidly evolving reality. It made therefore better sense to represent the international system as a mosaic in which all four models uneasily coexisted and interacted. Unipolarity was but the most striking component of this mosaic, but one whose salience would diminish over time at the expense of multipolarity, of both the competitive and co-operative variety. This interpretation in any case dovetailed with an international political economy perspective developed over the preceding fifteen years, that is, well before the end of the Cold War, which depicted the world system in terms of three competing but interacting tendencies (hegemony, imperial rivalry and imperial collusion).⁵ Put simply, the world system was one in which the United States exercised 'residual hegemony' but in the context of 'competitive interdependence'.⁶

In concluding this introductory note, it may be helpful to refer, at least parenthetically, to the competing perspectives of Chinese scholars and other experts – a debate that has gone virtually unnoticed in western writing on the subject. Since the mid-1980s, Chinese analysts have pointed to three distinguishing features of the new transitional era (thought likely to last several decades): increasing prominence of great power rivalries, higher incidence of local wars, and redivision of spheres of influence. Two distinct interpretations have nevertheless emerged: the orthodox view

⁴ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: 1995* (2nd edn with new supplement and related documents), New York, United Nations, 1995.

⁵ Joseph A. Camilleri, 'The Advanced Capitalist State and the Contemporary World Crisis', *Science and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 2, Summer, 1981, pp. 130-158.

⁶ The idea is further developed in Joseph A. Camilleri, *States, Markets and Civil Society in Asia Pacific, The Political Economy of Asia Pacific Vol I*, Aldershot, UK: Edward Elgar, 2000, pp. 148-152. As the title of the book indicates, a political economy perspective requires an integrated approach that focuses on the interconnectedness of state, market and civil society. This is highly relevant to any discussion of empire, for here, and especially in the context of the American empire, we are dealing with the American state certainly, but also and of necessity with the American economy, hence the role of US capital, and with American civil society. In what follows, I emphasise the functioning of the state, but by situating it explicitly or implicitly in the context of this triangular relationship.

which we associate with Huang Zhengji,⁷ and the dissenting view to which Yang Dazhou⁸ has been one of the main contributors. The conventional view, which underpins much of official Chinese discourse, has emphasised multipolarity as the dominant trend in international relations. This period of transition is associated with increasing competition on the world stage and the gradual decline of America's imperial position. A new era of turbulence, to which the rise of the Third World has significantly contributed, is said to serve as a constraint on US power and to lower the probability of a major nuclear exchange. By contrast, in the eyes of the dissenting voices, the dominant trend is not towards multipolarity but towards a pluralistic world system in which the United States maintains its superpower status and its major alliances. It interacts with four other important centres of power, but it is the only 'pole', the only power capable of deciding key issues in any region.

Over time a more sophisticated or hybrid position has emerged, which divides the transitional period into three stages: stage one (1989-91) marked by the fall of the Soviet Union; stage two (1991-2000) during which the international system has one superpower, two major military powers and three main centres of economic power; stage three (early part of the twenty-first century) which sees the formation of major centres of political power and the institutionalisation of a multipolar structure.⁹ The trend towards multipolarity is associated with the rise of a number of conflict zones, for example in Central Asia, new sources of tension with traditional conflicts that had been simmering during the Cold War now coming to the boil, and great power rivalries, most evident in the scramble for energy and other natural resources. Faced with such turbulence, the United States feels obliged to defend its dominant position by frequent recourse to the deployment and use of military power, an arena in which it enjoys unchallenged technological superiority, and by polarising international conflicts as a means of reinforcing its claims to leadership. These analyses, notwithstanding their limitations, captured two distinct but closely related features of this historical moment: geoeconomic and geopolitical fluidity, and the limits to US power.

US Dominance and the Ambiguities of Emerging Plurality

There is no denying that the emerging post-Cold War international landscape made for a good deal of ambiguity and not a little confusion, all of which may have served to mask the extent of US decline. Several features readily come to mind: the abrupt disintegration of Soviet empire, the survival of US alliances, indeed the apparent consolidation of security relationships in Asia

⁷ See Huang Zhengji, 'Volatile World Situation', *International Strategic Studies* (published by the China Institute of International Strategic Studies), 24 (2), June 1992, pp. 1-5.

⁸ Yang Dazhou's position is outlined in Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, Washington, DC, National Defense University Press, January 2000 (sighted at <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/pills2/part01.htm> on 28 June 2004)

⁹ See Chen Qimao, 'The Transitional Era: Roots of Turbulence and Features of International Affairs', *Shanghai Institute for International Studies Journal* 1 (2), 1994, pp. 15-32; also Chen, Qimao, "New Approaches in China's Foreign Policy: The Post-Cold War Era," *Asian Survey*, 33 (3), March 1993, pp. 237-251

Pacific and the enlargement of NATO, the revival of the US economy during the 1990s, Europe's inability to develop a conflict management, let alone conflict resolution, strategy following the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, China's preoccupation with economic modernisation, the technological sophistication of US military capabilities displayed in the first Gulf War and in Kosovo. The net effect was to feed the seemingly reasonable but nonetheless misleading notion of the United States as a hyperpower. The technological, military and economic resources at the disposal of the American state were not in question, but the capacity to use these resources in ways capable of producing intended consequences and preventing unintended ones was very much open to question.

Compounding the ambiguity were a number of developments in US policy, some intentional others accidental, that appeared to enhance effectiveness of the Bush Snr and Clinton presidencies. The relative success of Desert Storm, the Dayton Agreements and subsequent measures taken to enforce them, Clinton's prosecution of the Kosovo war, the Framework agreement with North Korea, all these pointed to limited objectives pursued with sufficient support – from allies, friends and the wider international community – and sufficient success to mask numerous failures elsewhere. Humiliation in Somalia was followed by disengagement in Rwanda; severe frictions and instabilities continued to afflict the international trading and financial systems notwithstanding the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the weathering of several financial crises; lack of clarity as to NATO's future purpose reflected deep-seated internal differences; stemming the tide of horizontal nuclear proliferation remained a high but elusive priority for both administrations.

US actions and pronouncements radiated power, yet this was abstracted power, one might say a kind of 'virtual' power that was not, perhaps could not be, clearly or systematically reflected in the concrete. To put it crudely, the power of the American states was more fragile than appeared to the naked eye. Ironically, this fragility would not come into full view until an American president succumbed to the unilateralist temptation, that is, until he and his closest circle of advisers became convinced that the United States was at the peak of its power and could wield undisputed authority in international decision-making. Not that unilateral intervention was an entirely Bush innovation. The Reagan presidency practised its own brand of cautious and limited unilateralism, and Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, was not reticent to describe the United States as 'the indispensable nation'.

The flaws of the unilateral option would be forcefully exposed when September 11 struck its devastating blow on the twin symbols of US power. The symbolic significance of the terrorist attacks was widely acknowledged but little understood. They dramatised the ominous but not entirely new reality that the United States had no monopoly on unilateralism. George Bush Jr, possibly the most unilateralist American President since World War II, was met by the arch unilateralist of our time, Osama bin Laden.

In the immediate aftermath, US policy-makers, intelligence organisations and think-tanks were spurred to action driven by scenarios which, though apocalyptic in the minds of many, were not entirely bereft of credibility. Vociferous opposition to US interests was rapidly gaining ground in many parts of Latin America; Russia was, however slowly, regaining something of its former economic and military poise; China was on the rise; unprecedented militancy had exploded in much of the Islamic world; the chronic US trade deficit had reached staggering

proportions; and much of Western Europe (governments, intellectual elites and public opinion) was more sceptical of and resistant to US leadership than at any time since the Pershing and Cruise missile crisis of late 1970s, some might say since the creation of the Atlantic alliance. In this deeper sense, September 11 and what was to follow offered the most revealing glimpse yet of the enormity of the US predicament. We would also see more clearly than ever before key features of the emerging international landscape, in which cultural and psychosocial currents would prove just as important as economic and geopolitical fault lines.

A Word on terrorism and the ‘War on Terror’

In responding to the terrorist attacks on US interests and launching a ‘war on terror’, the Bush administration laid bare the weakness of its position, namely the inability to articulate to its own (let alone any else’s) satisfaction answers to three closely inter-related questions. Whose war was this to be? Waged against whom? And with what specific objectives? The obvious answer to the first question was the ‘coalition of the willing’. But who were the willing then, and who are the willing now? Clearly, the number of the willing has fallen sharply over little more than three years. But it is more than a question of numbers. How willing are the willing? As it happens, many of the willing have been shown to have agendas of their own (at times hidden, often not hidden at all). In return for their willingness, they would each exact a heavy price, whether in the form of economic assistance, military aid, trade concessions, or diplomatic favours. In the case of Russia and China it has meant turning a blind eye to gross human rights violations in Chechnya and Xinjiang respectively.

The difficulties besetting the hegemon, or to be more accurate quasi-hegemon, should not be underestimated. The American state, it should be remembered, has had to carry its own public – a task, which despite the result of the 2004 presidential election, is by no means assured of success given the immense and still escalating human, financial and diplomatic costs of the Iraq war. Securing and maintaining the support of governments (in Europe, the Arab world, Pakistan, Japan and elsewhere) has proven just as taxing and often unrewarding.

The argument bears stressing: the means at the disposal of the imperial power are awesome, but so are the obstacles in its path. Over the last four years the Bush presidency has had to contend not only with reluctant or half-hearted allies, but with duplicitous friends, rogue states and an assortment of national and transnational movements, organisations and networks that refuse to be intimidated. To this was now added the frightening possibility (real or imaginary) of terrorist groups combining with rogue states, suicide bombers with weapons of mass destruction.

Ambiguity and uncertainty, now integral to the use force in international relations, have translated into imperial vulnerability. Indeed, ambiguity is at the heart of terrorism itself. What exactly does this phenomenon represent? Who or what are terrorists? What are their objectives and future plans? As for weapons of mass destruction, the questions are many but the answers stubbornly elusive. Who has them? Who might have them? Who could have them? Who wants to have them? In this potentially paralysing circumstance, Donald Rumsfeld’s comment at a Department of Defense briefing assumes a significance that few have fully appreciated:

. . . there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know.¹⁰

¹⁰ United States Department of Defense, *News Transcript, 12 February*

2002 (sighted at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2002/t02122002_t212sdv2.html
on 25 June 2004

Rumsfeld did now something: uncertainty. He knew that he, his department and the administration as a whole were in the throes of uncertainty. Pre-emptive action and the use of force were driven above all by fear of the unknown, the desire to control uncertainty, a desperate attempt to reaffirm the absoluteness of imperial authority. But the very attempt to do this, and do¹)it unilaterally, could not but accentuate the legitimacy deficit, which would prove to be the Achilles heel of US power.

The Changing Grammar of International Relations

September 11 and contemporary terrorism more generally – the Islamic dimension of the phenomenon gave the image added sharpness – mirrored and reinforced the unexpectedly and strangely turbulent seas in which US power now had to navigate. The United States had to contend with what Bertrand Badie has called the ‘changing grammar of conflict’.¹¹ Conflict was now waged by different means, or with the same means but at the service of different ends, or in the pursuit of different strategies. What after all is the meaning of Somalia, Bosnia, Iraq, Iran and North Korea, not to mention September 11, Bali and Madrid? Here we see the violence of the weak exposing the weakness of the violence of the strong.

In the case of the American state, its strength, as we have already seen, has been subjected to many constraints. Perhaps the most debilitating has been the inner contradiction which, though embryonically present in the latter part of the bipolar era, has become steadily more acute with the passage of time. This is the contradiction between the ‘new world order’ triumphantly proclaimed by Bush Snr in 1990 and the unwillingness or inability of the United States to establish the norms, rules and institutions implicit in the promised order. In most conflicts, Washington has not been able to perform the kind of regulatory or coordinating role that nurtures legitimacy. Over the last fifteen years, and most conspicuously in the last four, it has played the part of claimant rather than judge.

The weight of sentiment in much of Europe, East Asia, and the Third world generally is that the United States has sought to maximise narrowly conceived self-interest, whether it be at the United Nations, in NATO or the WTO, around issues of international trade, nuclear proliferation, climate change, or international criminal justice. To many, especially in the Arab and Muslim worlds, it appeared to lose any semblance of neutrality or even-handedness. In the words of Badie, it is as if its role has shifted from would-be ‘regulator’ to unconcealed ‘gladiator’.¹²

There is, of course, more to the constraints on US power than internal contradictions. Imperial conduct is not purely the product of internal motivations. External pressures inevitably influence and at times even shape policy outcomes. In this transitional moment, the spatial and temporal dimensions of international life are undergoing profound and rapid change. Traditionally the state has based much of its power and authority on the control of physical

¹¹ See Bertrand Badie, Marie-Claude Smouts (dir.), *L’Internationale sans territoire*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1996 (Cultures & Conflits).

¹² Bertrand Badie, ‘La puissance américaine condamnée à la modestie’, interview with Jean-Luc Allouche et Jean-Dominique Merchet, *Liberation*, 15-16 septembre 2001 (sighted at http://xtream.online.fr/china/references/www.liberation.com_quotidien_semaine_20010915samzc.html on 20 May 2004).

distance. However, with the transportation and communications revolutions and the ensuing exponential growth of transnational processes, relationships and organisations, the national state has seen the virtual monopoly it once exercised over space slowly but steadily dissipate.

The far-reaching reorganisation of political space has had several consequences. First, agency is increasingly exercised by old entities in new ways and by new entities in ways both old and new. The telling blows inflicted on the United States by Al Qaeda and their supporters through their use of the airwaves (courtesy not just of Aljazeera, but also of western media outlets) are a case in point. Transnational flows, in line with unstable social dynamics and the variable geometry of communication, commerce, industry and migration, cut across territories, evade borders and restructure space. Territory still offers the state important modes of control, but in relation to fewer goods and often with diminishing returns.

Secondly, territory has been severely destabilised by the reinvention of tradition. Partly in response to the crisis of institutions and the illusion of their regulatory efficacy, identity fever can take hold wherever states no longer make sense. The return to 'nature', to community, to the sacred, or simply to ethnic shatters the functioning of the territorial state as traditionally conceived. Present-day terrorism may be understood as a product of this dual movement of transnationalism and communitarianism.

A third element of change merits attention. With the end of bipolarity and the melting of the Soviet glacier came the disorganisation of space in the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, now the Caucasus, and with it increasing contestation over borders, uprooted populations, and new conflicts. We may legitimately speak of spatial chaos which the imperial power is scarcely able to comprehend, let alone resolve.

Far from establishing a new normative consensus on the meaning and functioning of territory, globalisation spawns at best ambiguous and at worst contradictory conceptions of space. Nowhere is this ambiguity more conspicuous than in the Muslim world. Here passionate micro-communities vie for a place in the sun with fiefdoms, struggling states, regional formations and religious movements. Is this not the meaning of post-invasion Afghanistan and Iraq, where the imperial power is struggling to regulate territory by administering a strange concoction of military force and incantatory democracy?

The evolution of the international system would seem to have reached a critical threshold that underscores the reasonably obvious yet often overlooked characteristic of societal organisation, namely the cultural and historical relativity of all spatial constructions on which such organisation is predicated. The present threshold is once again pointing to new ways of imagining and organising space, new forms of political geography. What after all is the meaning of the extraordinary rearticulation of German and Russian space that we have witnessed over a period spanning two world wars and the Cold War? This trend and its multiple ramifications have yet to run their full course. We need only bring to mind the fall of the Berlin Wall and its aftermath, and the accelerating reorganisation of European space. Indeed, we may be entering a period of even greater spatial reconstruction, if the growth of the new regionalism in its diverse manifestations and the hesitant steps towards global governance are any guide.

If it is the case that the emerging world system is one where both the grammar of conflict and the organisation of space are undergoing change, it follows that the function and *modus operandi* of all states will be affected, albeit some more than others. But, contrary to conventional wisdom, the impact may be most pronounced in the case of the world's most powerful state. For, notwithstanding the potent levers it can use to shield itself from unwelcome intrusions into its domain, the vastness of the territorial space over which it is obliged to exercise a degree of imperial control makes it especially vulnerable to changes in the logic of conflict and articulation of space. It is precisely this vulnerability that terrorist violence aimed at US interests has sought to exploit. The great irony is that terrorism has turned the globalisation of insecurity and the deregulation of the market of violence into weapons which it has used with devastating impact against the arch apostles of globalisation and market deregulation.

What is true of space is equally true of time. At first sight the compression of time scales – in other words speed –not least in the storage, retrieval and dissemination of information, should work clearly in favour of the high-tech hyperpower. Paul Virilio, the pre-eminent student of speed, has made much of America's capacity to wage 'virtual' or mediated war. In the first Gulf War, he was struck by America's capacity to transform local war into worldwide war, though the artifice of television and the controlled release of information. The result, he argued, was that 'real time prevailed over real space'.¹³ The hyperstate, equipped with cyber-optic vision, was capable of global telesurveillance. The 'virtual bubble' of the single world market was now followed by the 'visual bubble' of electronic optics, with images and information able to travel at the speed of light.

The US Air Force Chief of Staff in fact claimed that in first third of the twenty-first century the Pentagon would be able to find, track and target in almost real time any significant object on the surface of the earth. Even this unusually perceptive French analyst could not but be struck by this emerging revolution in military affairs. Was not Kosovo but the first full-fledged example of info-war in which US technology could rightly expect to reign supreme? Was it not this capacity that had allowed the United States to evade the United Nations, and might in time enable it to evade NATO itself?

Confronted like the rest of the world by the 'shock and awe' quality of the US invasion of Iraq, Virilio managed nevertheless to put events in perspective. He described the Pentagon's use of its awesome technical power as an 'act of panic'. To return to our earlier theme, the United States had to contend with two weighty unknowns. On the eve of the invasion Saddam Hussein almost certainly did not possess weapons of mass destruction, but could the United States be sure that he lacked the intention and capacity to acquire them in the future. Pre-emptive war was waged as a response to this first unknown. But no sooner had war been launched, that a second unknown came to the fore: how much resistance would Washington encounter, what form might it take, and most importantly, how long would it last? For Virilio, the hyperpower had been rendered powerless by strategic innovation or, to use his expression, by the 'metropolitics of terror'.¹⁴

¹³ Paul Virilio, 'Télésurveillance globale', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Août 1999, p. 4.

¹⁴ Paul Virilio, 'L'état d'urgence permanent', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, n° 2051, 26 février 2004 (sighted at <http://www.nouvelobs.com/articles/p2051/a233909.html>, 20 June 2004).

What is it that in Virilio's perspective has somehow overtaken America's technological supremacy, its seemingly exclusive monopoly over speed and precision? The answer, as one might expect, is to be found in the psychology of the new situation. Virilio's exposition is illuminating and merits careful reading:

With terrorism we have entered the era of war without end, in both senses of the word. Henceforth, a state of emergency is able to spread without the constraint of time or space . . . We must now be in a permanent state of alert for an accident that is always possible, always announced, always reported. We have entered a situation which is without historical precedent. It is a situation of hysteria. Hence, the use of the word panic. The ministry of Fear is gradually replacing the ministry of War and the ministry of Defence.¹⁵ (author's translation)

The unknowns or ambiguities inherent in the dynamic of nuclear proliferation and terrorism have, it seems, combined to haunt the psyche of the world's only superpower.

To complete this all too brief explication of the psychological underpinnings of the American predicament, I turn to Baudrillard who turns the spotlight on the American nation, as distinct from the American state.¹⁶ What were, he asks, the most visible elements of the response to September 11? Star-spangled banners, commemorative messages, prayer services, and the cult of victims and of post-modern heroes – fire-fighters and the police. Struck by an unimagined and unimaginable evil, the American nation presents itself as the victim that wants to be left 'alone with God'. The evil, Baudrillard tells us, which had hitherto existed merely in the American unconscious, has suddenly materialised by courtesy of 'Islamic' terrorism. Baudrillard wants to take us one step further, where perhaps many would prefer not to go. He wants to argue that what is unimaginable in the American consciousness is not just 'Evil' but also the 'Other'. It is this refusal, or inability, to conceive of the other, be it friend or enemy, in its radical otherness, in its irreconcilable foreignness, that ultimately transforms the objective hyperpower into subjective victim. Though we need not regard Baudrillard as having uttered the last word on the subject, his analysis of the American psyche and in particular his emphasis on the concepts of victimhood and 'otherness' provide a useful backdrop to the road we have travelled from Berlin to Baghdad, and lead neatly to a discussion of larger intellectual and cultural currents.

Discursive Competition

Events since the fall of the Berlin Wall are indicative of the attempts we have made to reorganise human affairs in the context of intensifying economic globalisation and the end of the Cold War system. Critical to this journey has been the task – to which many, not least US policy-makers, have devoted much energy – of identifying the principles which might sustain a new international order. Put simply, the question has been: What might be the international discourse that can legitimate the exercise of power and authority in the new dispensation?¹⁷

¹⁵ Paul Virilio, 'Télésurveillance globale', p. 5.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, translated by Chris Turner, London, Verso, 2003.

¹⁷ I am deeply indebted here to Fabio Petito's characterisation of the competing intellectual currents of the post-Cold War period, although it is probably more useful and accurate to think in terms of currents or discourses than theories. See Fabio Petito, 'The Dialogue of Civilisations as International Political theory: Khatami and Havel, paper presented at the workshop on "Political Science and Dialogue of Civilizations", International Centre for Dialogue Among Civilizations, Tehran, 15-21 May 2003.

For those who interpreted the end of the Cold War as the triumph of the United States and of capitalism more generally, the moment for a ‘new world order’ had arrived. We are all reasonably familiar with Fukuyama’s rendition of this theme.¹⁸ After the defeat of Communism, world history was said to have reached the end of its dialectical process. Economic and political liberalism was now the only game in town. It seemed to offer the only rational, indeed available model of economic and political organisation. Globalisation, understood as the globalisation of liberalism, was hastening the interconnection of human destinies, and in this sense pointed to the ‘final’ consolidation of human history. The victory of liberalism had exorcised, or at least substantially mitigated the two most troublesome features of international society, anarchy and war. We had come to the ‘end of history’ as the world had known it. Beguiling though it was, the theme was unsustainable. Though in different ways and to different degrees both the Bush Sr and Clinton administrations dabbled with this theme, in so far as it lent weight to US primacy in world affairs, it did not seem to serve the necessary legitimising function. Too many remained unconvinced; too many conflicts and divisions persisted; and no one seemed able and willing to deliver the promised new order. The discourse centring on the triumph of the free market and democracy would soon be complemented if not overtaken by notions of rogueness, military pre-emption, and the pursuit of narrowly defined self-interest.

By the early 1990s an alternative discursive map would emerge. Huntington’s ‘Clash of civilizations’¹⁹ became the best known exposition of this worldview, although the term itself was probably first coined by Bernard Lewis.²⁰ Conflict, threats and insecurity were seen again as abiding features of the international system, but with culture and religion as key categories defining geopolitical fault lines. In official discourse, even in the case of the present Bush administration, the prospect of a civilisational clash was not explicitly articulated. Nonetheless many pronouncements emanating from Washington, including presidential speeches and policy statements did proclaim a new political and ideological, not to say cultural, struggle pitting freedom and democracy against terrorism and Islamic fanaticism. US policy-makers had found a new way of depicting the struggle between good and evil and of bifurcating the world, in part as a way of preserving and legitimising imperial authority.²¹

As we have seen, this second discursive strategy has been no more successful than the first. Tied to unilateralist inclinations, it has disturbed friends and allies, whose perceptions and priorities were already at variance with those of the United States. It has sharpened and probably strengthened Arab and Muslim militancy, provided terrorism with a new lease of life, and in all likelihood given added impetus to the dynamic of nuclear proliferation.

Not surprisingly, even before the events of September 11 – some would say in fearful anticipation of them – several voices could be heard beginning to articulate a third discourse, sharply divergent in tone and inspiration from the two previously outlined. I am referring to the

¹⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London H. Hamilton, 1992.

¹⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations’, *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (3), Summer 1993, pp. 22-28. This much discussed article was subsequently developed into a full length study *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1997.

²⁰ Bernard Lewis, *Roots of Muslim Rage*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990 (sighted at http://www.travelbrochuregraphics.com/extra/roots_of_muslim_rage.htm on 20 June 2004.

²¹ See Joseph Camilleri, ‘Terrorism, Anti-Terrorism and the Globalization of Insecurity’, *Arena Journal*, no. 19, 2002, pp. 7-19.

‘dialogue of civilisations’. Though it has a longer history than many realise, the discourse as developed over the last ten years is still at an embryonic stage. Here I simply single out three voices – each of different origin, inspiration and language, but all three remarkably similar in their diagnostic and prescriptive implications.

Let me begin with a voice which perhaps better than any other symbolises the fall of the Berlin Wall, Vaclav Havel. An intellectual and playwright who in the 1960s came to epitomise the strong regenerative tendencies prevailing in Czech culture and Czech society in the 1960s, he eventually led the velvet revolution against Soviet-style authoritarianism, and in December 1989 was elected President of Czechoslovakia and later on of the Czech Republic. His intellectual contribution to civilisational dialogue is best encapsulated in the powerful metaphor of the ‘room’, evocatively suggested by the sharing of a prison cell, which is artistically developed in several of his plays. Our contemporary civilisation is compared to the common room in which we are doomed to live together, though each of us remains a different being:

Parallel to the process of global unification in today’s civilization, there is an opposite development unfolding simultaneously: nations and whole regions are re-awakening and asserting anew, often quite aggressively, their own ways of life, their unique identity, their traditions, their history, their deities, their habits, their cultures.²²

For Havel the only possible answer to the contemporary human predicament is a new ethos of co-existence or, to put it a little differently, a new normative structure of international society, which would transcend the Eurocentric Westphalian system. Such a structure, he made it clear, could not ‘rest on the set of imperatives, principles and rules produced by the Euro-American world’.²³ Different cultures and civilisations would need to play a part in identifying common ground. As if to emphasise the point, Havel, though faithful to the Atlantic partnership and grateful to the American role in the emancipation of his country from communist rule, nonetheless insisted that ‘the artificial world order of past decades ha(d) collapsed’, and that the central political task now was the creation of a new model of co-existence among the various cultures, peoples, races and religious spheres within a single interconnected civilisation. That he should have chosen to develop this theme in a landmark speech delivered on American independence day in the Independence Hall of Philadelphia where he was to be received with pomp and ceremony as one of the heroes of the post-cold War period, is indicative of the importance he attached to the symbolic link between his message, the occasion and his audience.

I now turn to a figure no less significant and just as controversial in his country and internationally, who perhaps more than any other has been instrumental in placing the dialogue of civilisations on the intellectual and political map. Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, the fifth president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is a religious scholar steeped in the study of philosophy. He headed the Hamburg Islamic Centre in 1979, is fluent in English, German and Arabic in addition to Persian, and has written several books and articles, little of which has been published in the English-speaking world. He successfully proposed the idea of the dialogue of civilisations to the Organisation of Islamic conference in 1997, and then gained the unanimous acceptance of the idea at the 1998 UN General Assembly, which went on to declare 2001 as the

²² Vaclav Havel, speech delivered at the Latin American Parliament, Sao Paolo, 19 September 1996 (sighted at http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index_uk.html on 22 May 2004).

²³ Vaclav Havel, ‘The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World’, speech delivered in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, 4 July 1994 (sighted at <http://www.worldtrans.org/whole/havelspeech.html> on 15 April 2004).

Year of Dialogue among Civilisations and to adopt the *Global Agenda for Dialogue Among Civilizations*. Numerous international governmental and non-governmental organisations have since adopted the principle and organised forums, colloquia and conferences, although declarations of principle have yet to be matched by sustained practice.

Significant as the organisational impetus he has given to the concept might be, his more notable contribution lies in the intellectual domain, and especially in his characterisation of the dialogical process. Dialogue, which for him is the common search for truth, is not meant to obscure or evade the differences that separate its participants, which is why for him the act is one in which listening is at least as important as speaking. Dialogue, then, is the encounter across cultural, religious, philosophical, ethical, civilisational boundaries, in which each participant listens to the other, becomes open, even vulnerable to the other. In this sense, dialogue engages the participant in a journey of self discovery:

It is only through immersion in another existential dimension that we could attain mediated and acquired knowledge of ourselves in addition to the immediate and direct knowledge of ourselves that we commonly possess. Through seeing others we attain a hitherto impossible knowledge of ourselves. Dialogue among cultures and civilizations, rests upon rational and ethically normative commitment of parties to the dialogue. . . [It] is a bi-lateral or even multi-lateral process in which the end result is not manifest from the beginning.²⁴

What, then, are dialogue's normative foundations? The recurring themes in Khatami's numerous speeches on the subject suggest the following key elements: a) the dignity of human being – made possible only through will to empathy and compassion – as the measure of world order; b) the refusal of politics without morality; c) the notion that ideas and values, embedded in cultures and civilisations, are an important determinant of political behaviour; d) the sense that intellectuals, poets, artists, scientists and mystics, precisely because they have the capacity and authority to articulate the large questions of human existence, have a unique role in civilisation dialogue. Many questions remain unanswered: Who participates in this dialogue? What are the modalities of dialogue? Are states participants or mere spectators?

There is nevertheless one idea, central to Khatami's conception of dialogue, which merits attention. In his celebrated 1999 speech at the University of Florence, he offered the following juxtaposition of East and West:

Orient, which even in an etymological sense signifies the process of imparting direction and order to things, can beckon Europe and America to equilibrium, serenity and reflection in the context of an historical dialogue . . . If deeply understood in their Eastern connotations, equilibrium and serenity lie beyond both the Dionysian and Apollonian extremes of western culture. The age of reason is an Apollonian age while romanticism is the opposite pull on the swing of the same pendulum.²⁵

Khatami's exposition takes us back to the question of what is to be the discursive framework that guides the post-Cold War era. For Khatami dialogue among civilisations is designed specifically to address the fault line that separates Orient and Occident, a fault line that has a long history, of

²⁴ Address by H.E. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami President of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Dialogue Among Civilizations Conference at the United Nations, 5 September 2005 (sighted at <http://www.un.int/iran/dialogue/2000/articles/1.html> on 12 May 2004).

²⁵ Speech at the European University Institute, Florence, 10 March 1999 (sighted at <http://www.dialoguecentre.org/PDF/Florence%20Speech.pdf> on 15 June 2004)

which the present difficulties between Islam and the West are but the most recent, perhaps geopolitically most troublesome manifestation

As the third influential voice I have chosen Tu Weiming, perhaps the foremost Confucian thinker of our time. Born in February 1940 in Kunming, China, he grew up and was educated in Taiwan and is now Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy and of Confucian Studies at Harvard University. He holds honorary professorships from Zhejiang and Renmin Universities and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, and advisory positions in Singapore and Malaysia, with the UN and the World Economic Forum at Davos. A five-volume collection of his works published in China in 2001.²⁶

A recurring theme of Tu Weiming's intellectual contribution is the modern transformation of Confucian humanism. Confucian values, he argues, remain highly relevant to modernity and are evident in contemporary social practices, at least as principles of societal organisation. These include:

- a) the role of the state in the management of the market;
- b) social civility as the key to civilised mode of conduct (law is useful but not enough);
- c) the family as the foundation stone of social civility;
- d) civil society as the indispensable nexus between family and state;
- e) education as the key to civil society;
- f) self-cultivation understood as both goal and process.

Confucian societies retain many of these values even as they embrace the fierce competitiveness of the West. The reason is not hard to fathom: modernisation and modernity are shaped by cultural forms rooted in tradition:

Traditions in Modernity are not merely historical sedimentation passively deposited in modern consciousness. Nor are they simply inhibiting features to be undermined by the unilinear trajectory of development – on the contrary they are both constraining and enabling forces capable of shaping the particular contour of modernity in any given society.²⁷

For Tu Weiming, these traditions constitute the critical elements of sustainable dialogue.

What can Confucianism bring to such a dialogue? Here is where Tu Weiming is at his most illuminating. He draws attention to what he calls the 'ecological turn' of neo-Confucian thought, and in particular to the contribution of three modern Confucian thinkers. Qian Mu (1895-1990), Tang Junyi (1909-1978) and Feng Youlan (1895-1990) based in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China respectively.²⁸ In their critique of the enlightenment and the discourse of modernity, they take us,

²⁶ Some of Tu Weiming's more important works in English include: *Confucian Thought :selfhood as Creative Transformation*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1985; *The Way, Learning and Politics in Classical Confucian Humanism*, Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1985; *Confucianism in A Historical Perspective*, Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1989; *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Exploring Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons* (editor), Harvard University Press, 1996.

²⁷ Tu Weiming, Lecture delivered Colorado College, 5 February 1999 sighted at <http://www.coloradocollege.edu/academics/anniversary/participants/Tu.htm> on 23 April 2004)

²⁸ Tu Weiming, 'The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World' (sighted at http://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/coce/pdf_files/s8.pdf on 23 April 2004).

he contends, beyond aggressive anthropocentrism and instrumental rationality, and pave the way for an inclusive cosmological and humanist vision that transcends the either/or mode of thinking in favour of a non-dualistic understanding of the continuity of heaven, earth and humanity.

The theme is a highly instructive one, for it offers another path to East-West dialogue. Placed in this context, it is not hard to see why Tu Weiming sees the long-term stability of the Sino-American relationship as likely to depend on China widening the frame of reference offered by its indigenous traditions. For him, it is these traditions that hold the key to its own spiritual self-definition. The United States which has hitherto functioned principally as a teaching civilisation may have to acquire more of the qualities of a learning culture. Put simply but not inaccurately, Tu Weiming suggests that we may be entering a 'second axial period' in which all the major religious and ethical traditions that arose during the 'first axial period' are undergoing their own distinctive transformations in response to the multiple challenges of modernity. It is possible that such reassessment will make possible, through a process of mutual learning an 'anthropocosmic' worldview where the human is embedded in the cosmic order. This period of transition is the 'dialogical moment', the beginning of a new history that is simultaneously global and plural. Such a moment, Tu Weiming tells us, can flourish when 'the politics of domination is being replaced by the politics of communication, networking, negotiation, interaction, interfacing and collaboration'.²⁹

This brief excursion into civilisation dialogue was not meant to cover what is now a large and rapidly expanding field of philosophical and cultural inquiry. Rather it was meant to suggest that, despite the vastly different cultural and ideological backgrounds from which they spring, influential voices have emerged calling for a distinctive approach to world order, sharply at variance with the one that appears to have informed the vision and conduct of the imperial power. This discourse lends itself to the following propositions:

- a) Dialogue, that is encounter with the other, is the path to self-discovery and is therefore a profoundly transformative process;
- b) Dialogue can proceed only with the renewal of tradition against the backdrop of modernity;
- c) The dialogue of civilisations proposes first and foremost the dialogical encounter between East and West;
- d) Such encounter will involve a new synthesis constituted of both differences and commonalities;
- e) The dialogue of civilisations offers the most promising cultural underpinning for emerging multilateralism, or global governance.

²⁹ See Tu Weiming's presentation to the seminar organised by the Danish Foreign Ministry, Copenhagen, June 1001 (proceedings edited by Jacques Baudot, *Building A World community: Globalisation and the Common Good*, Copenhagen : Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in association with University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2001.

What emerges from this review of civilisation dialogue is that several discourses are presently competing in the international arena for the attention of theorists and practitioners alike. The end of the Cold War, September 11 and its aftermath, not least the responses of the imperial power and in particular the war in Iraq, have added weight and urgency to this discursive competition. What is at stake is not simply or even primarily the future configuration of global geopolitics, but the norms that will guide the organisation of a rapidly globalising world. The evidence of the last fifteen years suggests that neither western triumphalism nor the clash of civilisations is likely to provide an acceptable let alone effective basis of world order. The journey from Berlin to Baghdad appears to have opened up a third possibility of a world that is simultaneously singular and plural. In this unfolding transitional moment, the journey between occident and orient has some way to go.