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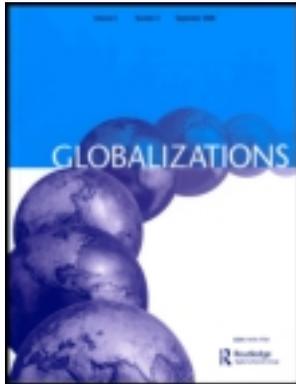
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The Limits of Open Door Imperialism and the US State–Capital Nexus

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ABSTRACT *This article analyses the US state–capital nexus at the heart of an American imperialism currently reaching its limits. In a first part we argue that the US state has consistently sought to promote and facilitate the global expansion of US capital, indicating a tight coupling between the two. Indeed, this so-called Open Door imperialism has been shaped and cemented by the strong ties between the foreign policy-making state apparatus and America’s corporate elite. With the aid of social network analysis and biographical mapping we show how many key foreign policymakers of the past three administrations have been recruited from the ranks of US transnational capital. This nexus helps to explain how under Obama, US ‘grand strategy’, analysed in the second part, remains wedded to the goal of maintaining the global Open Door empire in spite of the deepening contradictions in the context of the current crisis of the US-led neoliberal order.*

Keywords: US state–capital nexus, corporate elite, American empire, grand strategy, Obama

Introduction

At the end of the 1980s Paul Kennedy (1989 [1988], p. 666) famously argued that the US suffered from ‘imperial overstretch’ as the ‘sum total’ of its ‘global interests and obligations is nowadays far larger than the country’s power to defend them all simultaneously’. Ironically Kennedy wrote this just before the collapse of the Soviet Union and hence the emergence of the US as a unipole as well as what Arrighi (2005) termed the neoliberal *belle époque* of the booming 1990s. But now that the big boom has turned into an even bigger bust, the neoconservative hubris about what the US could achieve by seizing the ‘unipolar moment’ has been bitten by the realities of its unsuccessful wars, and the inability to tackle America’s rising debt has led to an unprecedented downgrade of its credit, Kennedy’s arguments again resonate in a renewed

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debate on US decline (Arrighi, 2005; Layne, 2009). This then raises the question to what extent American empire is reaching its limits. It also makes it pertinent to analyse the driving forces of US expansionism, driving the expansion arguably to a point where it can no longer be sustained.¹

In this article we argue that US imperialism as a project carried out by the US state is to a large extent driven by the interests and ideas of US (transnational) capital and should be explained not only in terms of the structural dependence of the former on the latter but also in terms of how the power of US capital is articulated and effectuated through the close links—shaping a collective overarching outlook—between US state officials and the US corporate elite. This then means that we can only make sense of the public power of the US state in relation to the private power of US capital. This *US*, i.e. national, state–capital nexus in our view is not dissolved by the globalization of capital (let alone the emergence of a putative global state). Although US imperialism can be argued to serve the interests of ‘global’ capital to some extent, we argue that the interests of *US* transnationally oriented capital have taken and still take precedence. As such US imperialism—which as a global project started out at the end of the nineteenth century with its attempts to open the ‘door’ to the Chinese and other foreign markets—is characterized by an incessant drive towards expansion, leading to successive rounds in which US capital’s geographical reach has been widened and its operative logic deepened. However, as capitalist growth as promoted by US-led globalization spreads to other regions and leads to the rise of other states and ‘their’ globally expanding capital (China in particular), this expansionist drive—through which the US state thus far has succeeded to maintain the globally dominant position of US capital—may now be reaching its limits.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In the first section we will elaborate upon, and theorize, the nexus between the US state and US capital and its role in American imperialism. Here we will distinguish two aspects: on the one hand. We will look at the role the US state has historically played and still plays today for US capital, on the other hand, we will argue that it are the strong ties between the US state and US capital that in part help to account for why the state has played that role. Section two will empirically substantiate—on the basis of biographical mapping and social network analysis—the latter claim by showing with regard to the three post-Cold War US administrations the close personal nexus and in fact large overlap between the US corporate elite, representing transnational capital, and state officials involved in the making of what in the literature is often dubbed ‘grand strategy’. We suggest that this to a large extent accounts for the continuity in that strategy, at least regarding its overarching goals.² In the final section we argue that this particular state–capital nexus thus also informs the grand strategy as pursued by the current Obama administration, as it is seeking to hold on to an empire that is challenged from both the outside as well as from within.

US Imperialism and the State–Capital Nexus

The historical distinctiveness of US imperialism lies above all in the non-territorial nature of its mode of domination (LaFeber, 1998 [1963]; Williams, 2009 [1959]; Wood, 2003). After the Civil War US expansionism became oriented towards the ‘conquest’ and domination of foreign markets rather than new territory. What Williams (2009 [1959]) has characterized as an imperialism of the Open Door, seeking to open the door to US surplus goods and capital, has become the basis of its grand strategy since the end of the nineteenth century onwards; creating a non-colonial, informal capitalist empire (for a more extensive historical discussion, see van Apeldoorn and de Graaff, forthcoming). The creation of this empire has not only been serving

the needs of, but indeed also has been politically driven by the interests bound up with, US expansionist and transnationally oriented capital.

While the concept ‘transnational capital’ is above all associated with the contemporary era of globalization (and will also be used as such by us in this article), the transnationalization of capital has a much longer history, which is intimately bound up with the global rise of American capitalism. Although we may arguably call capital only ‘transnational’ if within a single unit (i.e. a firm) a large part of its assets are not only located outside the home country but also dispersed over many national jurisdictions (often with the value chain itself being broken up geographically), the modern large corporations which emerged first in the US at the end of the nineteenth century were from the start seeking expansion abroad and making significant investments in Latin America and Asia in particular (LaFeber, 1998 [1963]; Wilkins, 1970). More generally, then, we may understand the notion of *transnationally oriented capital* (cf. Macartney, 2011) as that part of capital that seeks to expand outside its domestic market in order to sustain profitability; transnational here thus refers to a strategy rather than necessarily an already achieved state of affairs.³

As LaFeber (1998 [1963]) has documented, it was in the final quarter of the nineteenth century that among America’s emerging corporate elite a consensus had formed that in order to overcome the depression of the time and sustain capital accumulation, foreign markets were needed to dispose of the US’s surplus of industrial goods and capital. This elite was, however, well aware that capital could not open and penetrate these markets by itself, but, in the words of one industrialist at the time needed ‘an intelligent and spirited foreign policy’ to ‘see to it’ that these foreign markets were indeed opened (ibid.: 20). As we argue elsewhere (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff, forthcoming) non-territorial US expansionism has taken place in consecutive waves—at the end of the nineteenth century, from the end of the 1930s, and again from the end of the 1970s onwards—in response to crises of over-accumulation, that is, situations in which surplus capital can no longer be profitably reinvested within given parameters. As such it each time took the form of, to borrow Harvey’s term (e.g. Harvey, 2003), a sustained spatial fix (which was preferred over a more domestic and temporal solution in terms of redistributive social reforms), absorbing the surplus goods and capital in a way that directly served the interest of the transnationally oriented fractions of American capital. This form of economic expansionism, however, critically involved the role of the US state and its territorial-based power in opening and keeping open the foreign markets for US capital. This then refers to the role of the US state that van Apeldoorn, de Graaff, and Overbeek in this issue identify as that of ‘external representation’. However, the role played by the US in this regard is unique inasmuch as the US has shaped, indeed to a significant extent created, at least from 1945 onwards, the whole liberal capitalist world order.

The US State and the Expansion of Capital

The US state has thus for over a century played a critical role in enabling capitalist expansion, consistently seeking to break down protective barriers, open foreign markets, and help to establish ‘free markets’ and ‘freedom of enterprise’ and their concomitant institutions in an ever widening area. This capitalist freedom or what van der Pijl (1993; see also his contribution in this issue) has termed the sovereignty of capital has paradoxically gone hand in hand with, indeed arguably requires, the existence of multiple states as the freedom of capital is best ensured within ‘anarchy’, that is, if capital can freely move from one national jurisdiction to another. This, however, as Colás (2008) also argues, at the same time creates particular challenges for US

imperial rule as recognizing other states' formal independence means that one cannot always simply lay down one's laws there, and one always runs the risk that formally independent states seek real (democratic) autonomy. The US as an imperialist power thus always has invested a lot of resources in ensuring that the right regimes remained in power and that the wrong ones were overthrown. Non-territorial here thus means that the creation of a US imperium—after its earlier 'continental' Westward territorial expansion was completed and consolidated—with a few notable exceptions (such as the Philippines or Hawaii) has not involved the conquest or acquisition of new territories. Paradoxically, however, creating this non-territorial empire did constantly involve, and still involves today, the application of the power of the US state—a territorial unit—to try to create, maintain, or restore control over actual places and territories (Maier, 2006, p. 110), even while refraining from actual colonialism most of the time, and holding on to the notion (at times fictional) of national sovereignty. While seeking to maintain or put in place pro-US and (hence) (US) investor-friendly regimes at the national level and making them adopt the 'right' policies, the US has since 1945 of course also acted as in part the creator and guarantor of regimes of international and global governance aimed at maintaining and managing an open capitalist world economy.

Although this geopolitical role importantly involves employing the whole gamut of diplomacy as well as American financial power (Gowan, 1999; Konings, 2008), we should stress the crucial role of the possession and regular application of *military* power in creating and maintaining openness (Layne, 2006, p. 125). As Clinton's Secretary of Defense William Cohen explained, through military power 'we are able to shape the environment in ways that are advantageous to us and that are stabilizing to the areas where we are forward deployed, thereby helping to promote investment and prosperity' (Cohen cited in Bacevich, 2002, p. 128). Furthermore, it is America's overwhelming military superiority that allows it to enjoy 'command of the commons' (Posen, 2003), that is, the control of the international seas, airspace, and outer space, which the Pentagon itself argues to be so important as they allow 'for the high-speed, high volume exchange of people, ideas, goods, information and capital . . . critical to the global economy' (Department of Defense, 2011, p. 9).

What is American About US Imperialism?

At the heart of US imperialism lies thus a particular configuration of the nexus between US capital and the US state, one in which, since the rise of US corporate capitalism, the latter has consistently sought to facilitate the expansion of the former. But to what extent is so-called US capital still American and to what extent is the state still primarily national? Indeed is the whole notion of US imperialism still a useful concept in the era of (neoliberal) globalization? Are, for instance, as William Robinson (2007) claims, US large firms not so fully inserted into global circuits of capital that they no longer form part of any 'national capital' but must be regarded as globally operating *transnational* capital? To what extent does it still make sense then to look at the relation between state and capital (the theme of this issue) in any *national* context, that is, apart from seeing it as an instantiation of a global state–capital nexus?

We fully recognize the reality of global capitalism and the importance of the world market for the reproduction of capital. Also, as indicated, we would identify most of the large-scale and dominant US corporations as transnational capital. Nonetheless, we maintain that analysing the relation(s) between the *US* (national) state and *US* transnational capital is crucial; also for understanding the process of neoliberal globalization—which *has been enabled by the US*

state—and the way it has opened up the world to global capital and US capital in particular. The US state here should not be viewed as a mere ‘pivotal gear’ in a transnational state as Robinson (2007, p. 23) would have it inasmuch as it has been acting less on behalf of global capital as a whole—even if performing essential functions for the reproduction of global capitalism and protecting the interests of the propertied classes around the world (Panitch and Gindin, 2005)—as on behalf of *US* transnational capital *in particular*. Here we should note first that what we call transnational capital still is *also* nationally based economically—for many US TNCs the home market is still by far the largest single national market—as well as nationally embedded politically. The latter must *inter alia* be seen in terms of the close (personal) ties that exist between US transnational capital and the US state that in itself makes it implausible to view the latter as merely an agent of all global capitalists. This, however, is not to imply that the American state is simply an instrument in the hands of US capital, let alone of individual corporations. Although US foreign policy has often brought direct benefits to firms with privileged access to Washington—from the United Fruit Company in Guatemala in the 1950s to more recently Bechtel and Halliburton in Iraq—it would be a mistake to reduce US grand strategy, or even individual policy decisions, to such narrow interests. Indeed sometimes the latter might even be contradicted as ultimately the Open Door imperialism is about serving *the general and long-term interests of US transnational capital*, that is, opening and keeping open the door not just for today’s US corporations but also for the future.

America’s Open Door imperialism benefits US transnational capital *in general* above non-US transnational capital, first of all because US transnational corporations and financial institutions still tend to be among the most competitive in the world. In an open world economy where comparative advantage reigns, the comparatively advantaged tend to win out. Though the superiority of US (especially productive) capital may have been eroding in more recent times, it is still dominant within global value chains.⁴ However, even to the extent that US capital cannot out-compete its global competitors on purely economic (market) terms, the sheer geopolitical and geo-economic power of the US state can often make up for the difference. Here we single out two important dimensions of that power. First, US financial hegemony, as bound up with the reserve status of the dollar, not only benefits the US state (facing less balance of payments and budgetary constraints than other states), but also offers lower transaction costs and more freedom to US capital (Gowan, 1999, p. 25). Second, when the US uses its vast military superiority to open doors to US capital it is indeed US capital that benefits the most. Thus statistical research by Biglaiser and DeRouen Jr (2007) shows that indeed US FDI ‘follows the flag’—that is, it increases where the US has deployed troops either with or without the consent of the foreign government concerned—while such selection effects are not found for non-US investors. The fact that after Paul Bremer as governor of ‘liberated’ Iraq declared the country ‘open for business’ in 2004 it was above all US business that flowed into the new market (*ibid.*, p. 835) is a case in point.

In sum, for US transnational capital the power of the US *state* does matter, and it is hence that a possible hegemonic shift has potentially major implications for the former’s position within the capitalist world economy.

Cementing the State—Capital Nexus: The Role of Elite Networks

That US grand strategy serves the interests and reflects the outlook of US transnational capital can be explained partly in structural terms, that is, with reference to the structural (economic) power capital holds *vis-à-vis* state managers given the state’s dependence on successful

capitalist accumulation. Yet structuralist arguments can never offer a complete explanation of capitalist class rule and need to be supplemented with an analysis of (class) agency, as the structure of capitalist class rule can only be reproduced through agency (see van Apeldoorn, forthcoming). We thus need to analyse how and to what extent (as success is not guaranteed), the interests of capital and of the capitalist class are translated into state policy.

Here we note the structurally determined openness of the US political system to the ‘corporate community’ and its interests, and hence the particular *form* of the US state in which these interests are secured. As Peter Gowan (2004, pp. 3–4) pointed out, the US is in fact unique among advanced capitalist states with regard to the extent to which the state apparatus is dominated by the corporate elite and permeated by this elite’s worldview; the US is thus ‘a business democracy—a state with universal suffrage, which celebrates and accepts the world view and values of only one class, the business class, and which gives the business class extraordinary sway over public policy formation’. As documented by Walter LaFeber (1998 [1963]), this sway became manifest in foreign policy starting in the decades after the Civil War when a new corporate capitalist class emerged as a hegemonic social force. The dominant influence of this class over the so-called policy-planning process takes place through channels such as the formation of ideas in corporate-funded think tanks, the agenda-setting and lobbying of business associations, and—of course—through campaign finance (Domhoff, 2009). Arguably the biggest trump card of the US capitalist class, however, in this regard is formed by the personal ties between the state and the corporate community, with a large majority of US cabinet appointees, diplomats, and other senior officials since the rise of industrial capitalism having been recruited from the US corporate capitalist class (*ibid.*, p. 184). It is this then that constitutes the second aspect of the nexus between US capital and the US state, one that in our view helps to account for the particular role the latter has played in seeking to serve the interests of the former. To reiterate our point above, the fact that the US state apparatus is thus managed by members of America’s corporate elite does not make the state beholden to individual narrow corporate interests (even if sometimes this might play a role in individual cases) as these state officials, once they assume office, also assume a different role in which they no longer directly represent a particular corporation but the US government, and are expected to take a more general and longer-term view regarding the overall geopolitical interests of the US state. Yet in doing so, we would claim, their *worldview* is likely to be shaped to a very large extent by their social position as (former) members or affiliates of a class conscious corporate elite. Let us now empirically substantiate this particular notion of a close state–capital nexus for the post-Cold War era, with a focus on state officials responsible for the formulation and implementation of foreign policy broadly defined.

Networks of Transnational Capital and the US State in the Post-Cold War Era

The evidence presented in this section will illustrate the structural pattern of close linkages between the corporate community and the US state in the post-Cold War era. We collected biographical data on 87 key cabinet-ranking officials and senior advisors involved in the making of US grand strategy, 30 (with some overlaps between Clinton and Obama) from each of the three administration since after the Cold War ended—i.e. of Clinton, Bush 43, and Obama—in the starting year of each administration (1993, 2001, and 2009).⁵ These officials include next to the president and his senior staff and advisors: the vice-president; the secretaries of state and defence and their deputies; the national security advisor; the director of the CIA; the ambassador to the UN; the secretaries of the treasury and commerce; the US trade representative; and the director of the National Economic Council.

Our findings—see Table 1 below for an overview—show first of all that a very high percentage of our selected grand strategy-makers (have) had top-level corporate affiliations, that is, as executive, director, senior advisor, or e.g. partner in a law firm.⁶ If we only look at those affiliations that officials had before entering the respective administration—which we argue must be seen as important in shaping their particular outlook—the percentages are 50% of the selected grand strategy-makers of Clinton, and 73% in the case of both the Bush and Obama administrations. Our data also show that of those grand strategy-makers with corporate affiliations the vast majority return to high-level positions within the corporate community after leaving government (and sometimes again return to government years later etc.). A significant portion of the key grand strategy-makers of the post-Cold War era are hence so-called ins-and-outers, moving back and forth between government and the corporate community. This indicates that they are thus not only closely linked to the corporate elite, but are to a large extent indeed themselves part of this elite.

To what extent then is this corporate elite indeed dominated by transnational capital? In order to analyse this we have we have looked at the percentages of Fortune 500 corporations—which we take as a proxy for large-scale transnationally oriented capital—among all corporate affiliations held before assuming office. These are respectively 35, 46, and 37 for the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations.⁷ While these percentages are high, it must be added that this does not mean that other corporations do not also belong to, or are not closely associated with, transnational capital. Although not big enough to make it into the Fortune 500 many are nevertheless transnationally oriented. This includes many financial firms as well as many consultancy firms and international law firms who often have Fortune 500 multinationals among their clients. These two sectors in fact make up a total of around 50% of all corporate affiliations held before assuming office.

In order to gain a more detailed sense of the corporations and linking individuals involved, Figure 1 below maps—employing social network analysis (using the software Netdraw; Borgatti, 2002)—those companies to which at least two of our selected post-Cold War grand strategy-makers at some point in their career, either before or after their political appointment(s), were affiliated.

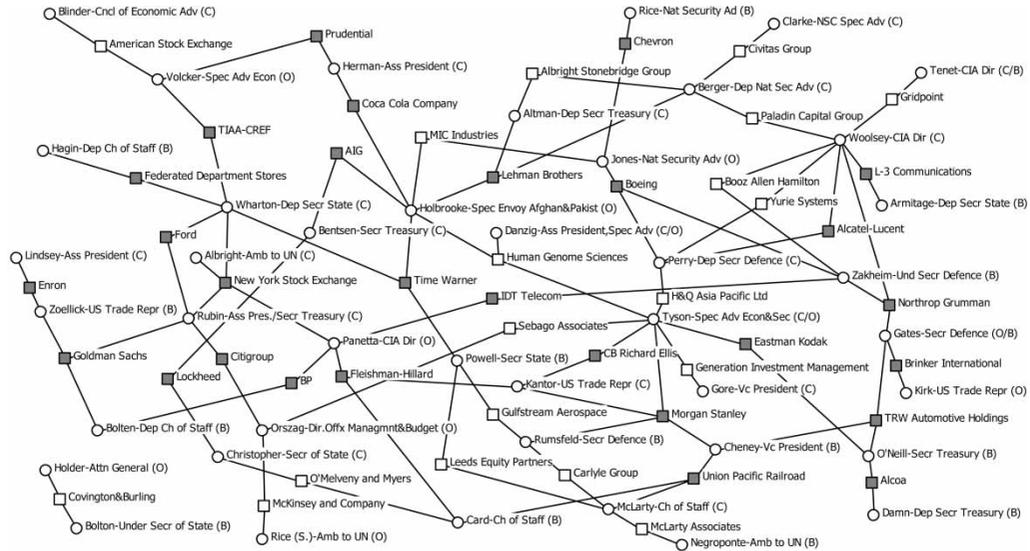
Figure 1 thus shows a network of post-Cold War grand strategy-makers and the companies for which they have worked at some—or several—point(s) in their career. The round nodes in this network are the grand strategy makers (with the main function(s) and respective administration(s)

Table 1. Number of corporate linkers and corporate affiliations per administration

	Clinton	Bush	Obama
Total	22 (190)	27 (178)	22 (129.)
Before	15 (41)	22 (89)	22 (113)
After	20 (149)	21 (72)	7 (16)
Revolving Door (before and after)	13	15	7

Sources: Own data collection.

Explanatory note: The numbers refer to the number of grand strategy-makers in each administration (out of a total of 30) that held corporate affiliations either before or after serving in that administration or both (revolving door). The numbers in parentheses refer to the total number of affiliations held by these grand strategy-makers. Of course, because of the time element these numbers are considerably higher for Clinton, while for Obama the totals ‘after’ are as yet low.



Note: circles = grand strategy-makers; squares = companies (grey = F500, 62%)

Figure 1. Network of companies and post-Cold War grand strategy-makers. Source: Own data

added to their name, i.e. (C) is Clinton, (B) is Bush 43, and (O) is Obama); the squared nodes in this network are companies. Since only the so-called ‘connecting’ companies (i.e. those with several or recurring ties to grand strategy-makers) are shown in this figure, it does not reveal the—at times considerable—extent of *other* corporate affiliations that most of these grand strategy-makers have. Also, since it could very well be that the affiliations took place at different points in time, we should be careful with the interpretation of this network as the links do not necessarily mean that there is a *direct* connection between the actors. What this network does show, however, is the companies that are *recurrently* connected to different grand strategy-makers of the post-Cold War period. The fact that this generates an extensive and closely linked ‘network’ of a total of 47 companies that are more or less evenly distributed between the grand strategy-makers of all three post-Cold War administrations is indicating that indeed there is a capital(ist) core that is closely and continuously connected to core of US grand strategy-makers, i.e. a US capital–state nexus.

In addition, this figure again demonstrates the prominence of transnational capital in this US state–capital nexus. As much as 62% of these connecting companies are *Fortune 500* (Global 500 in one case) notated companies (coloured grey); indeed this ‘network’ includes major US TNCs such as Coca Cola, Chevron, Time Warner, and Ford as well as global financial giants such as Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, and ‘too big to fail’ AIG. Although these ‘big linkers’ are clearly embodying transnational capital, they are in fact all *US-based* transnational capital groups except one: Alcatel-Lucent (listed on *Fortune Global 500*).

In sum the data presented here show how grand strategy-makers are closely linked to, and through a persistent revolving door pattern in fact can be considered an integral part of, a corporate elite dominated by US transnational capital.⁸ It is this particular configuration of the US state–capital nexus that in our view helps to explain the fact that US grand strategy-making reflects the interests of US transnational capital, underpinning its Open Door imperialist

character. In the next section we will assess to what extent the current administration will be able to hold on to this strategy while facing mounting challenges to the US shaped ‘empire of capital’ (Wood, 2003).

US Imperialism After the Crisis: Can the US State Keep Open the Door to US Capital?

The imperial grand strategy of the Open Door—with some variations—continued into the post-Cold War era, in particular by promoting ‘globalization’, i.e. breaking down barriers to trade and investment (both in bilateral and multilateral contexts); opening markets by using its financial power and ‘by institutional pressures exercised through the IMF and the WTO’ (Harvey, 2003, p. 181; see also Gowan, 1999). These policies were most fully developed during the ‘neoliberal globalization offensive’ of the Clinton administration. Yet, while in the 1990s this strategy still rested on a considerable measure of consent among America’s allies in the core, mounting challenges to the Open Door from the periphery made the coercive, military power of the state more pronounced as well.

Under Clinton this coercive dimension was limited to using the Air Force, and above all cruise missiles as the modern version of the gunboats of an earlier phase of US imperialism (Bacevich, 2002, pp. 148 ff.). Relying on its military superiority from the air was sufficient to punish miscreants resisting what Clinton (1999) called the ‘inexorable logic of globalization’ in an era in which US hegemony was still unquestioned. With the limits and contradictions of neoliberal globalization becoming more manifest around the turn of the millennium, however, and with 9/11 acting as the main catalyst, the neoconservatives who had entered the White House with the election of G. W. Bush, came to continue the imperialism of the Open Door in a way that put even more emphasis on the use of force, including full-scale invasions in the name of fighting the new enemy of Islamic terrorism.⁹

The renewed emphasis on coercion in the geopolitical role of the US has continued into the next administration. Indeed, Obama’s grand strategy shows a great deal of continuity with that of his predecessor. First, like Bush, and like at least all post-war presidents before him, the grand strategy pursued by Obama reproduces the imperialism of the Open Door, reincarnated as ‘globalization’ since Clinton. Thus Obama’s National Security Strategy remains committed to ‘opening markets around the globe [that] will promote global competition and innovation and will be crucial to our prosperity’, defining an ‘open international economic system’ as an ‘enduring’ American interest (White House, 2010, pp. 37, 7). But in pursuing these objectives of capitalist expansionism, the Obama administration also continues Bush’s relative emphasis on coercion, continuing in particular the latter’s *war on terror*, even if discarding the label. Thus Obama, while winding down American forces in Iraq (as Bush also had already intended), has not only implemented a threefold increase of the US occupation force in Afghanistan, but has also expanded operations by ‘Special Forces’ in an increasing number of countries (DeYoung and Jaffe, 2010). As Robert Kagan, a key neoconservative author, summarizes approvingly: ‘[a]lthough the Obama administration may be more generous in providing legal defense to captured terrorists than the Bush administration, it also makes a greater effort to assassinate them, thus obviating the need for trials’ (Kagan, 2010).

The point to stress is that the ongoing war on terror, or generally, the use of force on the part of the US, has less to do with ‘national security’ than with maintaining the Open Door empire and thus with furthering the interests of US transnational capital, sometimes directly, sometimes more indirectly. Inasmuch as transnational terrorism directed against the US is itself a product of America’s strategy of openness, it has an interest to keep it under control rather

than abandoning the Open Door, and to show to its own population that it can (see on this point Bacevich, 2002, pp. 118–121). The US state moreover has an interest in the public perceiving terrorism as a major threat, and therefore in constructing it as such, because this way it secures public support for what is the more important reason for continuing this war: to police its own Open Door empire and to punish those forces and countries who do not wish to succumb to this order, or even threaten it with disruption. Not only because the disruption itself is a threat to liberal capitalism and the operation of the world market; but above all because ‘rogue states’ or ‘terrorists’ challenge the US’s credibility as the world’s hegemon: it simply cannot afford not to respond forcefully to these challenges as this would diminish its power as the global enforcer of a US-centred global capitalism. Thus, as reported by Woodward (2010, p. 189), Obama’s then Secretary of Defence Gates, explained in an internal discussion on the Afghanistan war, the top priority in this effort is not just the security of the ‘homeland’ but ‘our interests abroad’ because ‘[if] the Taliban make significant headway, it’ll be framed as the defeat of the second superpower’. And losing or ‘be seen as losing the war’, as Obama’s then Security Advisor Jones, emphasized in a conversation with Woodward (2010, p. 127), is something the US can ill afford as then ‘[a]ny developing country is going to say, this is the way we beat [the United States], and we’re going to have a bigger problem’. Apart from pursuing these specific policies against actual and potential enemies of the Open Door, constructing ‘terrorism’ or Al Qaeda as a major security threat in general also helps to legitimize maintaining very high levels of military expenditure as, as argued, the possession, and (threat) of use of military force is indispensable for maintaining an Open Door empire (regardless of whether specific places like Afghanistan are as such vital in that respect). Additional reasons of course may be that these ‘terrorists’ operate from within areas that are of strategic value of the US (for instance because of the presence of oil or because of the strategic location vis-à-vis contender states such as Russia or China).

In sum, the role of the US state in maintaining the empire of (US transnational) capital has been rearticulated since the end of the Cold War, but, as we will argue below, the Obama administration faces three, interrelated, sets of challenges and constraints that would arguably require it to adjust its grand strategy more radically than hitherto has been the case.

The Costs of Empire

That America’s post 9/11 wars have turned out to be enormously costly has become acutely felt in the context of America’s current economic and fiscal crisis. As calculated by a new study undertaken by a research team at Boston University, the wars fought since 2001 have thus far cost an estimated US\$ 3.2–4 trillion.¹⁰ Moreover, these wars, especially the Iraq war, have further eroded America’s already waning legitimacy. More fundamentally they point to the problem of what Chalmers Johnson (2004) called ‘blowback’ as an inevitable and rising cost of empire. As the US seeks to open, and keep open, doors to US capital, and thus impose its order on other countries, it is bound to generate resistance from those who do not see their interests and identities recognized in that order. Rather than seeking to take away the causes of blowback, which would mean abandoning Open Door imperialism, the US is compelled to fight back (or even strike ‘pre-emptively’), of course, only fanning further blowback.

The grand strategy-makers of the Obama administration are clearly aware of at least the rising financial costs of this imperial logic. This for instance helps to explain Obama’s initial hesitance in committing yet more troops to Afghanistan in the fall of 2009 (Obama, 2009; Woodward, 2010), as well as the later decision to undo the latest surge by 2012. However, while cognizant

of the strain on America's resources and seeking to adjust the strategy accordingly, this in itself does not change the overall ambition of America's current grand strategy-makers, which remains that of maintaining a US-centred liberal capitalist world order. Thus, while a limited number of troops is being brought home from Afghanistan, the war on terror continues unabated, even if now in ways that are somewhat cheaper and less visible to the American public (being also less risky to American soldiers)—with, for instance, increased reliance on killing 'suspected terrorists' through the use of drones (as currently in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya; Strobel and Zakaria, 2011). This, then, sketches the fundamental dilemma of empire: maintaining it is costly, arguably too costly in some instances, but once one starts to give up on (too many of) these commitments one may end up on giving up on empire itself, endangering the capitalist interests that it has served for so long.

The Costs of a Failed Accumulation Strategy

The costs of empire are of course less of a problem to the extent that one can pay for them. In the end this depends on the ability to sustain a sufficient rate of capital accumulation and the ability of the state to tax. Any shortfall in the latter may be compensated for, through incurring public (external) debt, and hence the ability to pay also depends on the state's capacity to borrow. Given US financial hegemony, in particular the reserve status of the dollar, the capacity of the US state in this regard still is unparalleled. Nevertheless, even the US could not live on credit forever in the absence of economic growth. Thus a successful accumulation strategy remains critical. When a severe crisis of over-accumulation affected both the US and global capitalism in the 1970s (Harvey, 2003), capitalist class forces rallied around what became a neoliberal project aimed at restoring both profitability and class hegemony. As an accumulation strategy, neoliberalism involved an accelerated global deepening of commodification, with the export of surplus capital to new manufacturing centres in East Asia, as well as, and increasingly since the turn of the millennium, a debt-fuelled, finance-driven expansion of the economy. This way, however, the contradictions that became manifest in the 1970s have not so much been solved as displaced and deferred.

At the time of writing, the US so-called recovery remains very limited and fragile, and moreover, as shown in a recent study (cited in Luce 2012), 93% of the growth in 2010 accrued to the top 1% of Americans. In addition, the US is facing a crisis regarding its ballooning national debt as it continues to incur record budget deficits. This rising indebtedness is not only caused by America's wars in combination with Bush's tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, but of course under Obama has swelled as private losses were socialized and the fall of aggregate demand slowed down in order to avert a total collapse. Although US assets remain a safe haven for now, serious doubts have been raised to what extent an empire on credit is in fact sustainable in this way (Stephens, 2011). The capacities of the US as an imperialist *state* are thus undermined inasmuch as its ability to continue to finance not only its wars but its huge military machine in general is undercut. And the extent to which it is still able to do so this is thanks to the (re-)financing of its debt by rising powers such as in particular China, giving the latter a potential leverage over the US that will further undermine its global power (cf. Drezner, 2009).

In this context, then, seeking to regenerate sustained capital accumulation has become the number one priority for Obama: 'At the center of our efforts is a commitment to renew our economy, which serves as the wellspring of American power (White House, 2010, p. 2). Indeed, it is striking how much attention Obama's National Security Strategy pays to economic issues and policies to enhance US 'competitiveness' (ibid., pp. 28–34). However, nowhere do

Obama's foreign or domestic policies break with the neoliberal growth model that has led to this crisis (for a further elaboration, see van Apeldoorn and de Graaff, 2012a). Regulation of the financial sector has been timid at best while the possibility of more *state-led* efforts to regenerate the US economy, in spite of some talk about stimulating green energy technologies (e.g. White House, 2010, p. 34), is severely limited by the fact that the near bankrupt US state can ill afford such policies—unless, that is, one would be willing and able to raise taxes, redistribute and convert surplus private wealth into new public funds—of course a political non-starter.

The Price of Success

Although the neoliberal strategy has currently entered into a deep crisis due to its own deepening contradictions (see van Apeldoorn et al. in this issue), we should not forget that for several decades it has been a huge success, at least for the US and transnational capitalist class elites that have been propagating it. However, the process of neoliberal globalization that the US state has promoted suffers from a contradiction which is inherent in the geographically uneven dynamic of global capital accumulation. As noted before, the neoliberal accumulation strategy in part was premised on the transfer of production to the global South, with Western FDI flowing into East Asia in particular. While from the perspective of the imperial centre these shifts initially helped to fix its problem of over-accumulation, they have also led to the rise of rival centres of accumulation (Harvey, 2003; see also Arrighi, 2005), strengthening the Chinese state in particular, which now appears to emerge as a new contender to US (and Western) hegemony (see Kees van der Pijl in this issue). The shift of the centre of gravity of the global economy towards East Asia and hence relative US decline is likely to be accelerated by the great financial crash (cf. Schwartz, 2010), in particular as it has brought the US so much further into debt, and as China has become the main financier of America's twin (trade and budget) deficits.

In responding to these challenges the grand strategy of Obama on the one hand recognizes the reality of emerging powers and the need for the US to adjust to this reality. Thus, the National Security Strategy repeatedly calls for 'deeper and more effective partnerships with other key centers of influence—including China, India, and Russia' as well as for more diplomacy and engagement with both allies and hostile powers (White House, 2010, pp. 3, 43–50). On the other hand, the strategy adopted is clearly committed to maintain US primacy—in the Asian region as elsewhere—to serve the overarching objective of maintaining an Open Door empire. Such clearly transpires from the review of military strategy that the Pentagon recently undertook at the request of the White House. The review—significantly entitled *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*—states that 'we will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region' and argues that this is necessary because '[t]he maintenance of peace, stability, the free flow of commerce and of US influence in this dynamic region will depend in part on an underlying balance of military capability and presence' (Department of Defense, 2012, p. 2). Here, in particular 'China's emergence as a regional power' (ibid.) is regarded as a potential threat, inasmuch as China may undermine US pre-eminence through its persistent attempt to 'counter our power projection capabilities' (ibid., p. 4). Clearly, it is the US that should remain the only state able to project power in all regions of the globe, and certainly in this key region. This is not to say that US grand strategy-makers do not recognize the economic and financial co-dependency of the largest and second-largest economy and do not feel constrained by the fact that, as Secretary of State Clinton suggested, it is difficult to 'deal toughly with your banker' (US Secretary of State, 2009). But what is important, and again sketches the dilemmas of empire, is that the US remains committed to maintain its ascendancy in East Asia and is therefore also prepared to

adopt a tougher line against China even if this might risk geopolitical conflicts that in themselves might hurt US business interests in China. This is not, we would maintain, because here geopolitics trumps the interests of corporate elites, but because in the long run it is in the interest of the US state *as interwoven with US transnational capital*—i.e. the US state–capital nexus—to seek to maintain a liberal world economy dominated by the US and governed according to its rules, with an Open Door to global capital, first and foremost as based in the US. The fear, as transpires from the cited Pentagon document, is obviously that a rising and a more assertive China might under certain conditions very well (be able to) shut this door. It is thus that we have seen mounting geopolitical tensions with China, for instance over the South China Sea, which both China and the US have declared as a core national interest, with the US framing its interest in terms of ‘the freedom of navigation’ of a key international waterway (Pomfret, 2010).

In sum, the US continues to police globalization but finds this increasingly hard and costly—all the more so in the context of the ongoing economic and financial crisis. But while, as noted, the Obama administration more than its predecessor recognizes the need to adjust to the rise of contending powers this is not seen as incompatible with maintaining US hegemony and the attempt to create ‘yet another American century’ (Obama, 2007). Since the US state also under Obama thus remains committed to its overarching Open Door aims, the contradictions of US imperialism are likely to persist and deepen.

Concluding Remarks

In light of the three sets of developments and challenges to America’s liberal capitalist empire that we have outlined above, the limits of America’s Open Door imperialism may well have been reached. Although talk about US decline has waxed and waned before, what appears to be different this time is the rise of China as a much stronger contender than the already weakening Soviet Union was in the 1980s. At the same time, any notion of China taking over America’s role as guarantor of (liberal) global capitalism seems far off at best. Even if China were able to replace America in this respect, this would still not be an attractive prospect to US transnational capital, which in this way would lose the benefits that it thus far has been able to draw from the fact of residing in the world’s hegemon. Moreover, we have argued that the particular American state–capital nexus has provided US transnational capital with particularly close access to and potentially powerful influence over the US state’s (foreign) policy. It is unlikely that the American corporate elite would ever enjoy such close links to the Chinese state. Indeed, with a global state not being on the horizon either (for reasons we cannot go into here, but see de Graaff elsewhere in this issue), US capital is likely to continue to cultivate its ties to the US state and the latter is likely to continue to seek to serve the former’s expansionist needs, even if these needs will be increasingly difficult to meet.

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Notes

- 1 For some other recent (theoretical) accounts of US imperialism, see e.g. Harvey (2003), Wood (2003), and Callinicos (2009). In this article we analyse the driving forces of US imperialism in terms of the grand ‘imperial’ strategy pursued by the US state. We do not analyse the ‘nature’ of American empire or hegemony in

terms of how it is extending its rule over others states and societies, whether more on the basis of consent and forging transnational elite links ('hegemony'), or on the basis of more coercive strategies (for a fascinating discussion on the nature of US empire, see Maier, 2006). We thank one of the reviewers of this article for drawing our attention to this distinction.

- 2 In this article we focus on the continuity in US grand strategy and seek to explain this in terms of the US state–capital nexus. We interpret this continuity—like the so-called Wisconsin School of US revisionist historians (e.g. LaFeber, 1998 [1963]; Williams, 2009 [1959]) in terms of 'Open Door imperialism' but at the same time we recognize, more than the Wisconsin School does, the significant variations within this overarching continuity of the Open Door. However, analysing such variation falls outside the scope of this particular article (but see van Apeldoorn and de Graaff, 2012a, 2012b).
- 3 Some would argue that even today there is no such thing as we should not really speak of 'transnational capital'. According to this perspective, although there are *multinational* corporations, many of them are still so firmly based in their national home markets (with, for instance, two-thirds or more of their sales and assets located there) that to speak of them as 'transnational' would be misleading (see e.g. Anievas, 2008, p. 196). We would argue that even if a corporation is still, for example, two-thirds home based the other third might still be essential in terms of its business strategy and profitability, apart from the fact that also through other (inter-corporate and interpersonal) links these firms are often well embedded in transnational networks. The point is that we should bear in mind that 'transnational' does not necessarily mean 'global', and certainly not that the 'national' has been completely transcended, or is no longer a significant component of it.
- 4 US corporations also still dominate world markets more than any other single country. Thus for instance in *Fortune's* 2011 Global 500 list of the world's largest companies 133 firms are based in the US, while Japan comes in second place with 68 companies, followed by China with 61. See <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/global500/2011/countries/Australia.html>.
- 5 Data were collected from inter alia: US governmental websites, websites of the individuals' affiliations (e.g. company, university, and think tank websites), annual reports of affiliated companies, *Business Week*, *Forbes*, *Who's Who*, and the Right Web project of the Institute for Policy Studies (<http://www.rightweb.irc-online.org/>).
- 6 Although we consulted many different sources it is still likely that we missed several of them. These figures are thus probably an underestimate, especially the more one goes back in time (i.e. for the Clinton administration). In addition, note that if someone held several positions consecutively *within* the same company or held/holds several positions within the same company and or a subsidiary we have counted these as one corporate affiliation only.
- 7 We included those companies that had a F500 in the years 1955–2009; seven companies fall into the F1000 notations in the year 2009, and we have included those as well. We also checked the Global 500 notation of the companies and included then as well, six in total.
- 8 It must also be noted that in addition to the fact that, as we show here, the state executive is to a large extent led by members from the business elite, the latter also dominates policy formation through big business funded think tanks and other policy-planning organizations. For lack of space we do not go into that dimension here, but see van Apeldoorn and de Graaff (2012b) for an analysis of these policy-planning networks.
- 9 For a further analysis of the neoconservative project, see de Graaff and van Apeldoorn (2011); for a comparison between the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations with regard to these aspects, see van Apeldoorn and de Graaff (2012b).
- 10 See <http://costsofwar.org/article/economic-cost-summary>.

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