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HARNESSING THE UNITED STATES' SOFT POWER IN THE AGE OF ASSYMETRIC CONFLICTS AND GUERRILA WARFARE

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from history, literature and sociology, the paper explores the United States' continuous struggle to build a national identity based on solid cultural and ideological underpinnings in an age dominated by asymmetric conflicts and guerrilla warfare⁷. The paper looks at the United States as a nation under the threat of this new type of conflict. It discusses in particular, Emma Lazarus's famous 1883 poem the New Colossus⁸, as a symbolic representation, which will be seriously jeopardized by the Vietnam conflict and George W. Bush's "global war on terror". Historically, the bases under which the United States has built itself as a nation have been constantly under threat since the very beginning of the nation. Over time, this threat became more apparent and got exacerbated during key historical moments such as the Vietnam War and the September 11th attacks. Through these two events, the US experienced a new type of menace quite different from the previous ones: the rise of asymmetric conflicts and guerrilla warfare. As a new type of antagonism, asymmetric conflicts perniciously target the very concept of nationhood and the various ideological and sociological underpinnings of the US as a nation. The paper looks into that phenomenon and examines how it has come to be a serious threat to the United States.

Key-words: Antagonism, Asymmetric conflict, Culture, History, nation, power, guerilla warfare;

⁷ In a nation where everyone could potentially be viewed as an immigrant.

⁸ The words of which are to this day, inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

RÉSUMÉ

S'appuyant sur l'histoire, la littérature et la sociologie, l'article explore l'effort continu des États-Unis pour construire une nation sur les bases culturelles et idéologiques solides à une époque dominée par les conflits asymétriques et les guérillas. L'étude se penche sur les États-Unis comme une nation sous la menace de ce nouveau type de conflit. Elle interroge en particulier, le célèbre poème d'Emma Lazarus le "Nouveau Colosse" (1883) comme une représentation symbolique, qui sera sérieusement mis en péril par la guerre du Vietnam et la "guerre contre le terrorisme" de George W. Bush au lendemain des attaques du 11 Septembre. Historiquement, les fondements sur lesquelles les États-Unis ont été bâtis ont constamment été menacés depuis le début l'indépendance. Au fil du temps, cette menace s'est exacerbée pendant des moments historiques clés comme la guerre du Vietnam et les attentats du 11 Septembre, 2001. Lors de ces deux événements, les États-Unis ont été confrontés à un nouveau type de menace tout à fait différente des précédentes : le conflit asymétrique et la guérilla. En tant que nouveau type d'antagonisme, ces conflits ciblent pernicieusement le concept même de nation et les socles idéologiques de l'Amérique en tant que nation. L'étude se penche sur ce phénomène et analyse les menaces qu'il représente pour les États-Unis.

Mots-clés : Antagonisme, Conflit asymétrique, Culture, Guérilla, Histoire, nation, pouvoir.

INTRODUCTION

The September 11th attacks on the New York Twin Towers have revealed to the World both the harmful power of small-sized ideologically driven groups and the high level of vulnerability of supposedly militarily powerful countries such as the US, France, England and Spain. The attacks have shed light on the growing phenomenon of organized small groups which are spread all over the world and are ready to challenge in their own ways, the most organized nations and establish their own agendas. Looking at this phenomenon a growing number of analysts are assimilating it to a new type of organic conflict which, in nature, breaks with traditional conventional conflicts. Some even go further by seeing it as a new type of warfare which will dramatically change the nature of future conflicts⁹. This new development, they point, will dramatically signal the decline of the concept of nation-state and the emergence of new actors in the international scene. Besides,

⁹ William S Lind; Keith Nightengale; John F Schmitt; Joseph W Sutton; Gary I Wilson
"The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation" by *Marine Corps Gazette (pre-1994)*; Oct 1989; 73, 10

this new nature of conflict opposing supposed powerful States or allied States with barely identifiable forces, as seen in the footnoted article, correspond with the latest evolution in the history of armed conflict. This point of view is to a large extent shared among experts. In the following lines, we'll examine the arguments on this new type of conflict in light with major warfare targeting the US since the Vietnam War.

I. NATION-BUILDING IN THE US: A CONTINUOUS CHALLENGE

In his *Imagined Community's* (1990) Benedict Anderson sees nation-building as a continuous process drawing mainly from social, historical, cultural and political constructs. The nation as he posits, is an ' ' imagined political entity - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign...it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion: (Anderson, 2016: 9).

Anderson also shows the mechanisms by which, narratives and myths are developed and constructed to serve the ideal of national consciousness. For him, these stories come from culture, history, language and ideology (Anderson, 2016:11). In particular, he focuses on liberalism and Marxism as major ideologies which have shaped the identity of European nations from the end of the Second World War to the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the United States, the liberalism of John Locke made it possible to build a nationalism based on founding myths such as Manifest Destiny, the City Upon A Hill, the figure of the Pioneer going West or the myth of the Self-Made Man.

Those myths were all the more necessary as The United States, never stood as a monolithic country, it is a land of immigrants. The only group which could legitimately claim its native status is the Indian population, all the other population groups, including today's white majority, come from somewhere else. Consequently, the American nation has therefore never been built on the basis of any specific racial or ethnic identity; it was built on the basic abstract ideals summed up in the opening words of its 1776 Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are: life, liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"

Historically, nation building has been a problem right from the very first years of independence. The challenge was to build a republic from a monarchy and to create cultural unity out of so many different cultural backgrounds. The social difficulties of the United States as a nation where everyone is an immigrant, regularly surface as a major problem. But they are always met by what Ernest Renan sees as “a solidarity between autonomous modern subjects who desire to live under the same sovereignty” (Sand, 2011:26). That common desire is continuously nourished by foundational myths designed to cement national unity. In this respect, the concept of Melting pot played an important role. Originally, the concept comes from a metaphor used by the playwright Israel Zangwill to describe the American nation. In the process of nation building, the United States like any other young nation needed to rely on myths and ideologies to create an identity of its own. Melting pot as one of those myths stood as an ideological frame which facilitated integration. Through it, the US presented itself as a welcoming nation, a defender of the oppressed, a safe haven for immigrants. The welcoming spirit and resounding words of Emma Lazarus Poem, *The New Colossus* (1883) gave a perfect echo to that:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”¹⁰

Historically, this welcoming image led to an unprecedented mass migration of Eastern Europeans which ultimately benefitted the US economy and paved the way for the Gilded Age, an era of unprecedented economic prosperity which followed the difficult years of the Civil War and the decade-long period of reconstruction.

II THE RISE OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS: A CHALLENGE TO NATION-BUILDING

The relative success of guerilla warfare or armed resistance over colonial powers has been at the heart of Andrew Mack’s article entitled: “Why big Nations lose small wars: the politic of asymmetric conflicts” (Mack, 1975:175-200). Mack uses examples from the Algerian

¹⁰ Source Emma Lazarus: Selected Poems and Other Writings (2002)
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus> accessed, August 1st, ZOZZ,

independence war and the Vietnam War to show the way in which supposedly ‘‘weak’’ groups used attrition and some non-conventional methods to defeat sophisticated and heavily armed States such as the United States and France. Both articles look into the methods used by the supposedly ‘‘weak’’ as efficient strategies combining an intelligent targeting of the ‘‘strong’s’’ public opinion and culture as weapons leading to military attrition and consequently abandonment of the battle. In the case of Vietnam and Algeria, this very abandonment is poised as a sign of victory for the ‘‘weak’’ and defeat for the ‘‘strong’’. Mack also sees in the triumph of the ‘‘weak’’ a sign of the development of a new type of conflict which he terms asymmetric, which in nature, breaks with the rules of conventional conflicts and is a bit similar to the 1974 sporting combat between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. Ali as an outsider managed to use the tactics of the ‘‘weak’’ to defeat his mighty opponent by pushing him to overuse his own strength.

However, looking at the historical context of Vietnam, Indochina and Algeria, we think that the triumph of the ‘‘weak’’ seems to have more to do with rightness of a cause rather than with good tactics. It seems to us that even without military brilliance the ‘‘weak’’ would have won as the supposed ‘‘strong’’ had already been beaten on the moral ground. In the case of Algeria, the indignation of the French public opinion over the practices of the French army was one thing but was not a defining factor. It was undoubtedly the historic context of rise of liberation movements throughout the world and the rightness of the Algerian cause.

III. THE UNITED STATES AS A TARGET OF GUERRILLA WARFARE AND ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS

Small groups targeting the United States are typical examples of asymmetric conflicts with new actors directly attempting to compete with nation-states. These actors are not waging open conventional wars opposing two distinct forces; they are using violent terrorist acts to weaken the enemy in order to advance radical religious, political or ideological agendas which the majority of public opinion in the US do not necessarily share. Even if groups such as Al Qaeda for in instance have been quite successful with terror attacks such as bomb blasts and kidnapping of civilians, one cannot argue that they are winning the battle using attrition and indignations as is the case in the above-mentioned cases of Vietnam and Indochina. On the contrary, the group is being further isolated by a public opinion which at the same time provides green light and blessing to the US

army's actions against them. Besides, the cause and religious agendas of the group continue to take serious blows as its actions keep targeting innocent civilians and children. Guerilla warfare supported by US public opinion and relying on military attrition may prosper in the US only if its cause is just and fair and if its means are adequate (meaning if it aims at military targets and spare civilians). Another factor which could eventually make it possible for guerrilla warfare to prosper in the country is the United States' failure to use the soft power in a globalized context where national sovereignty remains a continuous challenge. It is only when the US fails in this¹¹ that groups using guerilla warfare and violent actions seize the opportunity to successfully advance their agendas.

III.1. VIETNAM AS THE FIRST US EXPERIENCE OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS

After World War II, the United States turned into the most powerful nation on earth. Yet, the trauma and consequences of the war gave way to a lingering fear of seeing other dictatorial regimes follow in the footsteps of Germany and their notorious former leader, Hitler. They also had to consider the other new mighty force symbolized by the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics that founded the communist bloc. Many conflicts broke out in the aftermath of World war II within the framework of the Cold War between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Among these, the Vietnam War stands out as the first U.S. experience of asymmetric conflicts.

Initially, the war in Vietnam was motivated by a policy first advocated by Harry Truman in the aftermath of World War II. That policy, called the *Domino Theory*, was intended to defend some values and principles. Truman writes in his memory the justification for that theory that came to play an important role in the American foreign policy: "It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." (Truman, 1956:106)

Vietnam was one of the nations that were under the threat of Communism. Americans decided first to militarily help and finance the South Vietnamese before sending US military troops later. It might be argued that the overemphasis put on Ideology turned out very costly for the

¹¹ As is the case of Libya since the fall of the Khadafi regime.

United States. Little wonder to see great thinkers like Alvin Gouldner warn against the abuses performed in the name of Ideology, which he assesses very critically as being: “the mind-inflaming realm of the doctrinaire, the dogmatic. the impassioned. the dehumanising, the false, the irrational, and, of course. the "extremist" consciousness.” (Gouldner, 1976:4) Besides, the U.S got entangled in an asymmetric war against an enemy that was fond of guerilla warfare because of the discrepancies of military means. The Vietnamese, who had just got rid of the French, were confident and knew that they had the advantage of knowing the terrain very well, unlike the Americans. Their guerilla warfare strategies led the Americans to be caught up in quagmire. In response to the Vietnamese “Find and Kill” tactic, Americans adopted the “Search and Destroy” one. The asymmetric dimension of the war urged them to try to adapt, but it did not pay off.

The overall means they resorted to, turned out disproportionate. Human and material losses were huge. To make things worse, the excessive means used by Americans to showcase their military might remind many neighboring countries of the preceding imperialistic European countries, which prevented them from getting their support. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt point out in their prominent work entitled *Power*, the imperialism reflected by their warlike posture:

The Americans acted during their brief tenure in Vietnam with all the violence, brutality, and barbarity befitting any European imperialist power. It seemed that the United States would declare itself the rightful heir to the declining European powers, donning their imperialist mantle and outdoing them at their own imperialist practices. (Negri and Hardt, 2000:178)

Asymmetric conflicts are very difficult to wage for superpowers, which can lead to their use of excessive power. In a war where it was difficult to make out the enemy from the ally, where the geographical peculiarities were far more understood by the adversary, Americans were quickly bogged down in a war of attrition. North Vietnamese were making the most of their multifarious guerilla warfare means, while Americans had to realize the uselessness of their formidable war arsenal, that would be so beneficial in a conventional war. Alas, Vietnam was the ultimate example of an asymmetric conflict and Henry Kissinger confirms the difficulties that the Americans had to defeat their enemies due to a combination of obstacles that did not favor their victory:

With rare and conspicuous exceptions like Douglas MacArthur, our modern generals have preferred to wear down the enemy through the weight of material rather than the bold stroke, through superior resources rather than superior maneuvers. In this they reflected the biases of a nonmilitary, technologically oriented society. But wars of attrition cannot be won against an enemy who refuses to fight except on his own terms. The Vietnam terrain, the nature of guerilla Warfare, the existence of sanctuaries, all combined to make it impossible for Westmoreland to wear down his adversary as he sought. Instead, the North Vietnamese hiding in the population and able to choose their moment for attack wore us down. (Kissinger, 1979:1004-5)

Those difficulties confirmed by Kissinger show the extent to which asymmetric conflicts are difficult to win for so called powerful nations. The setback undergone by the US in Vietnam against a supposedly weak enemy shows the extent to which the recourse to guerilla warfare combined with lack of moral justification could be detrimental to the supposed strong side. Beyond that, it questions both the usefulness and effectiveness of hard power and reinforces the advocates of soft power.

III. 2. THE SOFT POWER AS A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO MILITARY CONFRONTATION

In his book *Bound to Lead: The changing nature of American Soft power* (1990), Joseph Nye writes: ‘when one country gets other countries to want what it wants-might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants’ (Nye, 1990:82). As a world superpower, the hegemony of the US comes certainly from its military power which is undoubtedly one of the mightiest if not the mightiest of the world since the end of the Second World War. Yet the US cannot impose its will to everyone and everywhere. Military power cannot achieve that but the soft power might be able to do so. As opposed to hard power which refers to the military and technological and economic might, the soft power is associated with representation, imagery and discourse. Thus, the image of a hegemonic nation which imposes its law and verbally threaten its enemies as seen in the Bush administration’s ‘Global war on terror’ is what generally fans the flame of anti-Americanist sentiments. The discourse, rhetoric and attitude of US authorities in times of war as in times of peace have therefore a direct link with positive or negative feelings toward the US. But the soft power goes beyond politics, to include fields such as culture, diplomacy, international cooperation, economy, sports

and the medias. In many countries, the narrative of America as being a land of opportunities, the champion of democracy and the defender of the free world was reinforced by its soft power policy and in particular by the American media and popular culture mainly through Hollywood. Even though, its effects might be less visible and rapid than those of the hard power, the soft power has that unique capacity to craft an attractive image of the US and temper the hottest anti-American sentiments and attract others to US values, culture and worldview¹².

Looking at this unique capacity of the soft power, Nye writes: ‘A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness-want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power... co-opts people rather than coerce them. (Nye, 2004:83) Historically, the image of the US as a dominant and hegemonic military power is what generated asymmetric conflicts and increased anti-American feelings in several part of the world. The reversal of that image by a smart use of the soft power might be a viable alternative to military confrontations.

¹² The image of the US as a welcoming country and a place where everyone can achieve their dreams through hard work has to a large extent been crafted by the soft power exerted through American literature and the Hollywood industry.

CONCLUSION

Emma Lazarus's poetic representation of the United States, conveyed the image as a welcoming nation, 'a colossus', the power of which does not stem from its ability to use its military or geopolitical force but from its positive image and its capacity to transcend itself in times of crisis. Over time, that image has been eroded by dubious geopolitical options and a hostile rhetoric which fanned the flames of anti-Americanism and served as the bases for the rise of asymmetric conflicts and guerilla warfare targeting the US. The Vietnam War and George W. Bush's 'global war on terror' are typical instances through which the positive image crafted by Lazarus's poem will come to be seriously under threat. These conflicts also revealed the vulnerability of the US and its incapacity to face pernicious asymmetric conflicts and guerrilla warfare despite its military and technological advantage. In this regard, the soft power appears as an alternative and a viable option which can be used to reduce anti-Americanist sentiments and provide an alternative to military confrontation, which as the study has shown, cannot be considered a viable solution to asymmetric conflicts and guerilla warfare.

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