

## Twenty Years Later: Why 9/11 Has Not Been a Second Pearl Harbor

by Riccardo Alcaro

In the immediate aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, an overwhelming majority of commentators drew a parallel with the surprise blitz by Imperial Japan against the US Pacific fleet in Hawaii's Bay of Pearl Harbor, on 7 December 1941.

The comparison rested on two pillars. The first had its roots in historical analogy and symbolic impact. The Pearl Harbor attack was the closest precedent of an aggression against the United States on its soil.

The fact that the United States was caught by surprise, combined with the considerable toll in human lives exacted by the aggressors (more than two thousand people died in Pearl Harbor and almost three thousand on 9/11), lent legitimacy to such comparison. As all US citizens at the time would forever recall what they were doing when news of the Pearl Harbor attack came through, so do all US citizens (and not only) remember what they were

busy with when the image of the Twin Towers wrapped in flames appeared on TV screens on that Tuesday back in 2001.

The second reasoning underlying the parallel between Pearl Harbor and 9/11 concerned the impact on US domestic politics and, consequently, foreign policy.

Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II first against Japan and then Germany and Italy, eventually leading it to victory against the Axis powers and more fundamentally to a radical change in its approach to international affairs.

The war effort against the fascist powers and the necessity to shape post-war reconstruction in a manner that would protect US security and welfare created the conditions for the public to support the call by elites – from both parties – for the United States to engage in world affairs more deeply

*Riccardo Alcaro is Research Coordinator and Head of the Global Actors programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). An Italian version of this article was first published by Huffington Post Italia: "20 anni dopo, perché l'11 settembre non è stata un'altra Pearl Harbor", 7 September 2021, <https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/61371513e4b0f1b970653a32>.*

and extensively than had been the case before December 1941.

WWII permanently catapulted the United States to centre-stage in global affairs. From that moment on, the United States would embrace the role of hegemonic power in the West and guarantor of an international order based on its interests but also its values, political system and model of economic development.

9/11, so the argument went, would similarly resolve public uncertainties regarding the US international role that had surfaced in the decade after the Cold War, as a new mission loomed over the horizon: the fight against “freedom-hating” international Islamist terrorism.

The October 2001 intervention against the Taliban who had sheltered Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, was largely backed by the public. So was the invasion of Iraq, not even two years later, although in that case it helped that the George W. Bush Administration manipulated public opinion by subtly creating the perception of (non-existent) links between al-Qaeda and Iraq’s longstanding ruler Saddam Hussein.

Afghanistan and Iraq were just the main fronts of a larger war that the United States would wage wherever the terrorist threat was detected. Accordingly, President Bush coined the term “Global War on Terror” and turned it into the guiding star of US foreign policy. Public opinion, the argument concluded, would support the Administration’s efforts as it had

the intervention in WWII and the long Cold War against the Soviet bloc.

Twenty years on, time is ripe to disregard the legitimacy of the parallel between Pearl Harbor and 9/11.

No doubt the two events will forever remain etched in the US collective memory. Yet, 9/11 has not ushered in an era of general agreement across political parties and between elites and the public concerning the US global engagement as Pearl Harbor did.

This different outcome is mostly the making of US political elites. In the 1940s and early 1950s, President Roosevelt and his successor Harry S. Truman committed the United States first to total war against the fascist dictatorships and then to systemic confrontation with the Soviet bloc on a strategic rationale the public could not just understand but also share – at least to a large extent.

The Roosevelt and Truman Administrations were also clear in defining their strategic objectives – destruction of the Axis’ military power and containment of Soviet influence – and wise in selecting the tools to achieve those goals: the United States prevailed over the Axis and the Soviet bloc not just thanks to its military prowess but because it forged large coalitions and international alliances.

By contrast, the Bush Administration put forward ever-changing objectives. The hunt for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the alleged threat posed by Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction (which, again, would prove to be

non-existent) blended over time in a vaguely defined strategy for democracy promotion.

President Bush's "freedom agenda" confusingly merged the fight against terrorism, opposition to autocratic rulers (especially if they were not aligned with US foreign policy preferences) and large-scale nation-building in countries the United States had little knowledge of and less-than-vital interests at stake (unlike Europe and East Asia, strategically central both in WWII and during the Cold War).

The indeterminacy of the objectives, which many regarded as smoke and mirrors concealing the ambition to expand US global hegemony, went hand in hand with the inadequacy of the means: massive reliance on hard power, reluctance to envision long-term diplomatic engagements with rival countries (most notably China, Russia or Iran) and the never-extinguished tendency to act unilaterally.

Ultimately, the results have been anything but what the Bush Administration promised they would be, a promise that successive administrations were never able to fully disown. Afghanistan was never stabilised and is now back in the Taliban's hands, Iraq continues to be a weak, divided and unstable country, Islamist-rooted terrorism is way more diffused today than it was in 2001, and liberalism and democracy have receded, not advanced.

The ambivalence of goals, the inadequacy of means and the disappointing results of the US's post-

9/11 foreign policy have dented the domestic credibility of the federal government and widened the gap between the general public and the foreign policy establishment. The Global War on Terror, ostensibly the principle around which a US "grand strategy" for the 21st century was expected to revolve, has not only been a massive foreign policy failure but also a colossal domestic politics blunder.

Proof of it is that Bush's successors based their attempts to rebuild cross-party public consensus for US foreign policy on the rejection of the Global War on Terror and the interventionism – liberal or not – inbuilt into it. In these terms, by declaring the age of extensive military intervention and large-scale nation-building over, Joe Biden has kept the promise the excessively cautious Barack Obama and the unnervingly erratic Donald Trump did not honour: namely veering away from the US's ruinous post-9/11 foreign policy path.

The most significant of Biden's choices in that respect, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, may cost him re-election in 2024. However, by accepting defeat in Afghanistan the US president may have given his successors the opportunity to refocus internal consent on a foreign policy driven more by systemic strategic interests – such as the competition with China and the fight against global warming – and less by liberal and/or imperial delusions.

9 September 2021

## Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì ([a.dessi@iai.it](mailto:a.dessi@iai.it))

- 21 | 43 Riccardo Alcaro, *Twenty Years Later: Why 9/11 Has Not Been a Second Pearl Harbor*
- 21 | 42 Riccardo Perissich, *US Credibility and the Afghanistan Withdrawal*
- 21 | 41 Jesse Colzani, *If you Can't Beat Them, Join Them: Should States Embrace Bitcoin?*
- 21 | 40 Smita Srinivas, *Industrial Policies for Health: The G20 Must Act Now*
- 21 | 39 Lorenzo Kamel, *Decolonising Knowledge: A Euro-Mediterranean Perspective*
- 21 | 38 Majda Ruge, *Six Principles to Guide EU Action in the Western Balkans*
- 21 | 37 Riccardo Alcaro and Nathalie Tocci, *Seizing the Moment: European Strategic Autonomy and the Biden Presidency*
- 21 | 36 Felice Simonelli and Nadina Iacob, *Improving the EU Policymaking Process: The Dos and the Don'ts*
- 21 | 35 Dario Cristiani and Silvia Colombo, *Making Sense of Italy's Renewed Economic Diplomacy Towards Libya*
- 21 | 34 Mustafa Çıraklı, *Can Confidence Building Measures Help End the Cyprus Deadlock?*