In this section, I briefly describe the complicated nexus of cooperation, competition, and conflict between the most powerful industrial societies. US-China relations are especially prominent in this regard, and I examine them in the closing chapter.

1. The aspirations and realities of US empire

International relations after 1989 have been dominated by the United States. Nevertheless, the US government has not been able to consolidate the hegemonic leadership they almost reached in the 1990s. By contrast, an erosion in US predominance is looming that can sharpen geopolitical conflicts between once close allies. However, claims that US hegemony is already in a free-fall appear to be premature.¹ For the foreseeable future, the US state will be able to take advantage of being a unified economy with enormous capacities that actually grew during the 1990s (even if not on the scale reached by its economic predominance after 1945). Moreover, the US will continue to benefit from its enormous military superiority in relation to other industrialised states, and thus will continue to be a comprehensive centre of activity and a ‘monopoly on violence’, no matter how precarious. Finally, the US, as well as other states and other internationally operating individual capitals, will try to make use of this monopoly on violence for their own reproduction.

¹ See Wallerstein 2003; Arrighi 2005a; and 2005b.
Analysing US power can thus help to specify and clarify ‘Empire discourse’. It is important to understand that US power élites formulate their goal of an overarching ‘empire’ based on its historically unique power capacities; that is, they are not merely engaging in ideological wishful thinking or making exaggerated claims about ‘American exceptionalism’. For decades now, as Bacevich explains, US foreign policy has strategically aimed to create a global market that the US state can regulate. A number of benefits result from this dominant position, such as ‘hegemonic rents’ (in part due to having the leading currency) that can exceed the costs (such as defence expenditures) associated with creating this world order in the first place.

In fact, the United States controls international space in ways that no other actor can. To a certain degree, its world order politics function as a service provider for corporations and for sections of power élites from other industrialised states interested in having access to stable profit-making opportunities and supply chains. The sort of culturalist conception that exists in one form or the other in ‘Western’ states of a unity of the ‘civilised’ world (and the ‘barbaric world’ as its counterpart) is probably one normative indication of this.

2. Billing 2004. Already in the 1920s, US President Wilson knew enough to frame the status of an ‘informal empire’ in terms of universal rights discourses (see Panitch and Gindin 2004a, p. 38). ‘In practice, Wilson’s ideological concept disguised a distinct power-politics and balance-of-power politics, and not just with respect to Wilhelmine Germany or later against Soviet Russia, but rather to the previous world power, namely Great Britain, as well’ (Link 1996, p. 266).

3. Bacevich 2002, p. 3; compare pp. 79–116, 215 et sq. In the current period, this aspiration appears to correspond to the mass of profits that US corporations realise abroad: ‘Taking the year 2000 as a reference, the comparative size of USDIA profits [profits that US corporations or their subsidiaries made abroad] appears striking. USDIA profits represented 53 percent of domestic profits. This shows the dramatic importance of this category of this internationally generated income for corporate profits in the United States’ (Duménil and Lévy 2004b, p. 662).

4. Massarat 2004, pp. 22 et sq. As Neil Smith describes, US global strategies in the twentieth century have always pursued global-imperial goals (even and especially under Wilson, Roosevelt, and Clinton). He thus conceives of US liberalism as a nationally oriented ‘internationalism’, which has never simply been an idealistic approach to politics, as conservative forces maintain, but rather has sought to impose ‘geographies of practical liberalism’ in the realist sense (Smith 2005, pp. 44–52; compare McCarthy 2007).

5. See Nye 2002, and Fukuyama 2006. It is not possible at this point to go into further detail about the internal intellectual and political power shifts among power élites in the United States (see, for example, Glassman’s approach, which discusses the continuities and transformation of US foreign policy from a neo-Gramscian perspective: Glassman 2005). An ideological shift took place in the 1990s at the highest leadership level of US politics. In the last years of the Clinton administration, as with the subsequent Bush administration, the US acted more sharply in accordance with geopolitical strategies for which geo-economic predominance functioned as a pre-requisite for a geopolitical (power-)base (Gowan 2000, pp. 2–78; compare Hirst and Thompson 2002, pp. 118–9). The rise of neoconservatism connected a critique of liberal-internationalist readings of modernism to an attempt to re-moralise foreign policy (Williams 2005, p. 321; compare Callinicos 2003; Hening 2006, pp. 61–82; McCarthy 2007). Previously, the field of IR lacked a thorough engagement with the theoretical foundations of neoconservatism. It might be too soon to simply categorise it as a sub-current of neorealism insofar as it explicitly orients itself against neorealism’s ‘scientific rationalism’.