

U.S. Hegemony

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Abstract:

Perceptions of the US and its position at the centre of the contemporary international order have changed dramatically of late. To understand why, we need to look at the basis of American power and the role the US has played in actively creating a distinctive international order over the last fifty years or so. Before considering the specific historical record of American hegemony, this paper explains how the concept of hegemony is understood in the various strands of theoretical literature that utilise the term. Scholars working in different traditions have very different views about what hegemony is, and about whether it is desirable or inevitable. Yet all of them contain potentially important insights.

Introduction

Over the last decade or so, it has become increasingly commonplace to describe the United States as an 'hegemonic power'. While there are some important differences in the way various theoretical traditions understand the notion of hegemony, which will be explored in detail below, it is generally taken to refer to the dominant power of a particular era and its capacity to shape the international system of that time. That the US has come to be described as hegemonic is indicative of just how powerful most observers consider it to be in comparison with other countries in the contemporary international system. This is somewhat surprising for two reasons: first, for much of the 1980s, and even into the 1990s, it was commonly assumed that the US was in permanent decline (Keohane 1984). According to one widely noted argument, the apparent deterioration of the US economy was thought to be causing 'imperial overstretch', and America's economy was thought to be increasingly incapable of underwriting its geo-political ambitions as a consequence (Kennedy 1988). This perception was completely overturned by the beginning of the twenty-first century – despite lingering doubts about the underlying strength of the American economy (see Brenner 2001). The second reason for surprise about the widespread discussion of American hegemony is that, as a term, hegemony was used most frequently by radical scholars concerned about what they considered to be the negative impacts of hegemonic dominance. However, when even mainstream, market-oriented publications like *The Economist* (2002) routinely describe the US as hegemonic, it is indicative of just how much perceptions of American power have shifted, and just how widely its dominance is recognised.

To understand how and why perceptions of the US and its position at the centre of the contemporary international order have changed so much of late we need to look at the basis of American power and the role the US has played in actively creating a distinctive international order over the last fifty years or so. The periodisation is not arbitrary, for it was only in the aftermath of the Second World War that it became unambiguously clear that America had become the most powerful country on the

planet. Before considering the specific historical record of American hegemony, however, it is important to spell out in greater detail just how the concept of hegemony is understood in the various strands of theoretical literature that utilise the term. As we shall see, scholars working in different traditions have very different views about what hegemony is, and about whether it is desirable or inevitable. Yet all of them contain important insights which help us to understand the nature of contemporary US hegemony.

Theories of Hegemony

'Hegemony' is derived from the Greek, and originally referred to the dominance of one state over the others in the international system. This might seem like a relatively straightforward way of conceptualising the relationship between states, but it is important to stress at the outset that many observers consider hegemony to be a much more pervasive force than this sort of exclusively state-based analysis might suggest. 'Radical' scholars working in a broadly Marxist tradition, for example, draw attention to what they see as the evolution of a transnational capitalist class, which they claim has emerged in tandem with changes in an increasing integrated international economy as an integral part of structure and operation of hegemony (Cox 1987; Robinson and Harris 2000). Even liberal theorists recognise that American hegemony, particularly in an era characterised by processes of 'globalisation' embraces far more than simply the power of the US state (Nye 2002; Ikenberry 1998). Nevertheless, as the Greek origins of the term suggest, 'realist' scholarship has a venerable tradition of thinking about hegemony which continues to generate important insights.

At the centre of the realist view of hegemony are the same assumptions that inform realist thinking more generally: unitary states are the principal actors in an essentially anarchic international system, survival in which necessitates an endless struggle for supremacy and material advantage, with stability being achieved through a balance of power (Waltz 1979). What is distinctive about realist theories of hegemony, however, is that at particular historical moments one state will assume a paramount position that allows it to 'organize political, territorial, and especially economic relations in terms of their respective security and economic interests' (Gilpin 1981, p 144). The two key examples of this possibility are Britain in the nineteenth century and the US from the second half of the twentieth onwards. Crucially, both countries were able to assume a dominant position because of their military and economic strength, something that allowed them to either impose their will on lesser powers, or encouraged subordinate countries to follow their leadership.

Given the assumptions realists make about the competitive, zero-sum nature of the international system, hegemonic power is consequently seen as cyclical: one power will ultimately be replaced by another as uneven economic growth fundamentally transforms power relativities between states. Changes in the underlying balance of power are resolved in hegemonic wars as a new international hierarchy is established around the emergent hegemonic power (Gilpin 1989). Even though some of the most influential realist perspectives on hegemony question whether any state has the capacity to achieve global dominance, the logic of realist thinking dictates that hegemonic powers will and – in America's case at least - *ought* to try and suppress rivals in the interests of systemic stability (Mearsheimer 2001).

These assumptions about warfare and the management of potential conflict continue to figure prominently in the theory and practice of hegemony. Charles Kindleberger's (1973) highly influential analysis of the inter-war economic and financial crises was based on his claim that such turmoil resulted from the failure of any country to play an hegemonic role. Kindleberger's ideas brought the concept of hegemony back into mainstream scholarship, ultimately paving the way for the development of hegemonic stability theory. In essence, Kindleberger's argument was that the Depression of the 1930s was a consequence of the failure of any country to impose an 'open' economic order and ward off mutually destructive beggar-thy-neighbour economic policies. Such ideas influenced the construction of the post-war international order and much subsequent theorising about hegemony. Interestingly, Kindleberger's broadly realist position has been extended by liberal theorists.

In the 1980s most liberals were primarily concerned with how to encourage international cooperation 'after hegemony' (Keohane 1984), as the expectation was that American power would decline, and countries would need to find new ways manage their interactions. However, in the aftermath of the Cold War, and with the US assuming a relatively uncontested 'unipolar' position in the international system (Wohlforth 1999), attention has turned to explaining the failure of other countries to 'balance' American power in the way realist theory predicted. Arguably, the most sophisticated and interesting contribution to recent liberal theories of hegemonic power has been developed by G John Ikenberry. A number of points are worth highlighting in Ikenberry's overall position, as they help us to understand contemporary events. First, Ikenberry (2001) argues that wars and their aftermaths present especially fluid moments in which emergent hegemonic powers can create a new international order. Significantly, however – and despite what Ikenberry recognises as the US's unparalleled power – the international order the US was instrumental in creating was one characterised by a high degree of institutionalisation. The Bretton Woods regime, considered in more detail below, not only provided a capacity to manage and guide international economic and political relations, but it provided key incentives and pay-offs for all concerned. While the overall liberal international order may have reflected and furthered the interests of the US as the dominant power of the era (Latham 1997), subordinate nations benefited from the creation of a predictable, open, rules-based economic order, and – crucially – the self-restraint of the hegemonic power which was also constrained by the very system it had created (Ikenberry 2001; 1998).

Liberal theorists like Ikenberry, then, have extended Kindleberger's original formulation and created a sophisticated explanation for the persistence of American dominance. However, it is important to recognise that the liberal position contains a number of - frequently unacknowledged - normative assumptions about the supposed benefits that may flow from hegemonic power generally and from US dominance in particular. The final theoretical tradition to be considered here, which draws its inspiration from Marxism, takes a very different view about both the supposed benefits of US hegemony and the way that it is maintained.

One of the most important and influential statements of this more radical position has been developed by Robert Cox. Cox's understanding of hegemony has been heavily influenced by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1992), and consequently places a great deal of emphasis on the historical evolution of capitalism and the ideological

discourses that have emerged around it. Although the conceptual framework that informs Cox's account is very different from Ikenberry's, and reflects fundamental assumptions about the inherently conflictive nature of class-based societies characterised by inequalities of power and life-chances, his analysis of the operation of hegemony has some surprising parallels. For Cox, one of the key tasks for capitalist states is to create ideological support and legitimation for the existent (inequitable) order. Significantly, this is made possible because it offers 'some measure of support or satisfaction to the less powerful' (Cox 1987, p 7). Like Ikenberry, therefore, Cox recognises that – for some class allies in other parts of the world, at least – there are potentially significant pay-offs to be derived from cooperation with the hegemonic power of the day.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this sort of Gramscian-inspired analysis of hegemony is that, although it shares realism's concern with the way power may be used to promote particular interests in a potentially self-interested manner, it does so in ways that go beyond realism's reductionist, state-based analysis (Germain and Kenny 1998). At a time when the international system is widely considered to be shaped by processes associated with globalisation, the emphasis placed by neo-Gramscian scholarship on the trans-nationalisation of social relations, and the crucial role played by what Cox (1987, p 359) describes as a 'transnational managerial class' in managing the increasingly integrated global political economy is clearly important. What neo-Gramscians draw attention to is the multi-faceted nature of hegemony in the contemporary period and the way in which particular ideas can become the ruling orthodoxy and profoundly constrain the choices available to individuals and policymakers alike (Gill 1994). Consequently, hegemony can be far more institutionalised and pervasive than simply the policies of one state (Agnew and Corbridge 1995, p 17). Indeed, it is important to recognise in this context that even 'the United States' may be constrained by new patterns of power and authority that have emerged in the international system. For the US is, of course, a disparate array of centres of power and influence that encompass not just the foreign policymaking elite, but an array of historically powerful domestic interests (Trubowitz 1998), and increasingly influential transnational forces that can limit domestic policy-making autonomy of even the most powerful state (Cerny 1996). To see why, it is useful to compare the way American hegemony has evolved in the post-war period.

US Hegemony in the Bretton Woods Era

It was only in the aftermath of the Second World War that it became apparent just how powerful the US had become. Potential European rivals were either defeated like Germany, or left permanently weakened, like the former hegemon Britain. What had been unclear during the inter-war period was now unambiguous: the US was the most powerful country in the world. Its power was not unrivalled, however. The distinguishing characteristic of the first phase of American hegemony was that it occurred within the overarching context of the Cold War and the concomitant, implacable rivalry with the former Soviet Union. This overwhelming strategic imperative, and what was then the very real concern with Soviet expansion, powerfully influenced the strategic orientation of the US and gave a particular cast to both its military and economic policies. Indeed, American hegemony of this period cannot be understood unless both aspects of its overall policy position are considered.

Despite the inflammatory ideological rhetoric that issued from both sides of the 'iron curtain', the dangers inherent in direct, nuclear-armed, 'superpower' confrontation were widely recognised and accepted, as was the underlying bi-polar balance of power between the US and the Soviet Union (Hobsbawm 1994). This did not stop the US from clearly articulating its commitment to opposing Soviet expansionism, however. The 'Truman Doctrine' spelled out America's commitment to protect people everywhere from 'subjugation' and established it as the leader of the 'free world'. But the impossibility of directly confronting the Soviet Union meant that much attention was given to cultivating sympathetic allies and client states in what became an increasingly global rivalry. Despite the fact that the US's preoccupation with the fight against communism meant it frequently supported allies that were authoritarian and undemocratic, the logic of the Cold War superpower confrontation became 'the organizing framework for intentional relations and for the world economy' (Cronin 1996, p 45).

One of the most significant and enduring characteristics of American strategic policy was to establish itself at the centre of a dense web of 'hub and spokes' security relationships. This essentially bilateral architecture extended throughout the strategically pivotal theatres of Cold War confrontation. In Europe, NATO became a critical element of this pattern of US-centric alliance structures, while in East Asia, a series of bilateral relations entrenched the US's position across the region (Mastanduno 2002). Significantly, the US was prepared – until the early 1970s, at least – to back this commitment with direct military involvement in Korea and Vietnam. Equally important in the longer-term, however, was the US's commitment to aid directly the establishment of sustainable, successful capitalist economies.

It was this element of American hegemony – the preparedness to use certain types of foreign aid and investment to encourage capitalist economic development that is one of its most distinctive characteristics. Even more remarkable, perhaps, was the pivotal role the US played in creating the complex institutional architecture which has effectively managed and encouraged the development of the contemporary global political economy. By comparison, the Soviet Union, despite being considered a superpower and credible strategic and ideological rival, had nothing like the same capacity as the US to shape the post-war international order.

Although American policy during the Cold War may have been driven primarily by its antagonism with the Soviet Union, it is important to recognise that, even before the Second World War had concluded, American policymakers were already turning their minds to the shape of the international system in its aftermath. The central goal as far as the economic system was concerned was to avoid the 'mistakes' of the interwar period when the absence of an hegemonic power willing to provide critical public goods was widely considered to have contributed to the economic crises. Two aspects of American policy are worth highlighting: first, through innovative policies like the Marshall Plan, America provided the essential capital to kick start the reconstruction process in places like Western Europe and Japan (Hogan 1987). Second, the US was instrumental in designing the innovative and distinctive 'Bretton Woods' institutions that were to become such prominent parts of the emerging system of global governance.

The key elements of the Bretton Woods framework were the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which would ultimately be replaced by the World Trade Organization (Eichengreen and Kenen 1994). Together, these institutions provided the building blocks for nascent global policy coordination, and actively promoted ideas that would come to be associated with neoliberalism and the Washington consensus. However, it is important to recognise that, in its early phases, at least, the Bretton Woods system that emerged under the auspices of American hegemony was far more multilateral than it would ultimately become in the contemporary period, and it was a system in which individual states potentially retained a noteworthy degree of autonomy. Indeed, one of the striking characteristics of the original Bretton Woods order that prevailed until the early 1970s, was what Ruggie (1982) described as 'embedded autonomy', in which states cooperated to promote trade liberalisation, but did so within the context of a system of managed exchange rates, which allowed a good deal of domestic policy autonomy. When the US government decided in 1971 to unilaterally abandon a system of regulated exchange rates because of its own budgetary problems - which emerged partly as a consequence of the Vietnam War and partly because of growing international economic competition from the very countries it helped to revive economically - it effectively ended the old system and paved the way for the contemporary wave of financial sector liberalisation.

Although the US was the only country that could unilaterally transform the international economic system in this way, it was this period that seemed to reveal the apparent vulnerability and lack of competitiveness of the American economy, and which fuelled the idea that it was in irreversible decline. It was also during this period that there was a noticeable shift in US policy. Although US policy may still have been concerned with promoting the sort of open, liberal order associated with globalisation, it was increasingly prepared to unilaterally employ its political and economic leverage to achieve policy goals it considered to be in its 'national interest'. The interminable trade disputes with Japan that occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s were emblematic of this new approach (Schoppa 1997). In short, over the first four decades of American hegemony there was a discernible shift in the way that America engaged with the world, one that has been thrown into sharp relief by the policies of the current administration of George W. Bush in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on America.

Contemporary Hegemony

There are three key factors that have come to define and underpin the contemporary style of American hegemony: the end of the Cold War; the remarkable renaissance of America's economic position; the attacks of September 11th and the concomitant (re)militarisation of American foreign policy. Important as the latter has been in shaping the foreign policy of the current Bush administration, it is the end of the Cold War and the emergence of America as an unrivalled unipolar power that may prove of greatest long-term significance.

Until 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet empire, US policy was constrained by the existence of a credible rival. The very existence of an alternative centre of power meant that other states could potentially play off one side against the other. With the demise of the Soviet Union and China's increasingly enthusiastic embrace of capitalism, there is less room for manoeuvre even for relatively powerful countries,

especially as far as the general direction of economic policy is concerned (Buzan and Little 1999). Significantly, if – or more realistically perhaps, when – China achieves an economic and military capacity to rival that of the US, it is likely to do so as challenger *within* the overarching international system American hegemony has helped construct, rather than as an alternative to it. In such circumstances, not only are American-based interests unlikely to be directly threatened by such a development, but China is likely to find itself constrained by, and socialised into, the very system that has underpinned its recent rise (Johnston 2003). Thus, the ideological component of American hegemony has been reinforced not just by the ‘soft power’ that flows from the pervasive influence of US culture and values (Nye 2002), but from the fact that there are presently no credible alternatives to market capitalism. True, there are still important and persistent varieties of capitalism (Coates 2000), but the overall dominance of the capitalist system and the pervasive influence of market principles has led some radical observers to argue that the US is at the apex of a more diffuse, unprecedented form of imperial hegemony (Hardt and Negri 2000; Woods 2003).

America’s dominant position has been reinforced by the unexpected and remarkable transformation in its own economic position. Concerns about imperial overstretch and hegemonic decline have given way to triumphalism and predictions of another ‘American century’ (Zuckerman 1998). Although the rise and fall of the ‘DotCom’ share market bubble served as a troubling and timely reminder that much of America’s apparent economic renaissance was in fact based on speculation, debt, and a structurally embedded, potentially volatile dependence on foreign capital (Brenner 2000), it remained the case that in the year 2000 the US alone represented about a third of global GDP and defence spending (*The Economist* 2002). Even more remarkably, perhaps, America’s overwhelming military dominance was achieved on the cheap: not only did the US spend more on defence procurements and R&D than all the other major powers combined, but it required less than 4% of GDP to do it (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002). Such dominance was unprecedented and provided a powerful spur to the third distinctive quality of American hegemony in the contemporary era: the militarisation of American foreign policy.

The terrorist attacks on America would have provoked a major re-think about the direction of policy no matter who was president. Even before September 11, however, the administration of George W. Bush had displayed a noteworthy willingness to abandon multilateral agreements it either disliked or felt to be too constraining, an approach that was powerfully reinforced by an influential coterie of neo-conservative advisors and commentators (see, for example Kagan 2003). In this context, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was quick to recognise that the events of September 11 and the subsequent ‘war on terror’ represented a possibly unique opportunity to apply America’s undoubted pre-eminence and ‘refashion the world’ (cited in Bacevich 2002, p 227). Like their predecessors in the aftermath of World War 2, the current crop of American policymakers are imposing their vision of a possible new intentional order. By contrast with their forerunners, however, the current style of hegemony is a good deal less multilateral. In the security sphere American policy has become increasingly unilateral – a pattern articulated in the new doctrine of ‘pre-emption’ - whilst in the economic sphere, the trend is increasingly toward bilateralism.

There is one echo of the earlier era, however: as in the Cold War, the new 'war on terror' is seeing an explicitly linking of security and economic issues as the US uses its power to encourage compliance with its overarching strategic agenda. Unlike the Cold War period, however, disgruntled friends and foes alike have nowhere else to turn. The implications that flow from the current administration's attempt to systematically link security and trade issues can be seen in the behaviour of less powerful but strategically significant allies like Thailand, which has embarked on a vigorous crackdown on 'terrorist threats' as part of a wider campaign to gain a bilateral free trade deal with the US (see Beeson 2003). Indeed, at a time when American actions – specifically the privileging of narrow national interests on the one hand and grand strategy on the other – are effectively undermining the extant multilateral system and entrenching the move toward bilateralism, America's policy leverage may actually be enhanced in the short-term, at least.

The Future of American Hegemony

Seen in a long-term historical context, recent changes in the style of American hegemony are significant and mark an important shift from the more consensual, multilaterally-based form of hegemony that prevailed for much of the post-war period. It remains to be seen whether such a policy will be sustainable and whether other countries will seek to 'balance' American power as realist theories of international relations would lead us to expect. At this stage such an outcome looks unlikely, but this does not mean that American foreign policy-makers can act with impunity or total autonomy either: even the US is susceptible to changes of sentiment in global financial markets and highly dependent on continuing inflows of capital to underpin its rapidly deteriorating budget position. Indeed, for all its undoubted economic might the costs of actually using its latent military advantages are significant, and it is unclear whether this will be sustainable either economically or – more importantly, perhaps – in the face of domestic opposition if foreign entanglements go badly.

Already the potential constraints on American power are becoming evident in Iraq, where the US's increasingly unilateralist impulses have been given greatest expression. The campaign to impose order and 'regime change' in Iraq has, at the time of writing, begun to bog-down in a costly, brutal and potentially long-term conflict that will test the attention span of American policy-makers and voters alike. Most significantly, perhaps, the Bush administration has been forced into a humiliating back-down: its earlier criticisms of the United Nations as irrelevant and impotent have been modified as it desperately seeks assistance in managing the Iraq conflict. The impact of the militarisation of American foreign policy is also becoming painfully apparent as the cost of the campaign in Iraq mounts; when combined with an ideological commitment to tax cuts for the core Republican constituency of affluent Americans, the budgetary position of even the US begins to look unsustainable (*The Economist* 2003).

It is always difficult and generally unwise to speculate about the future on the basis of rapidly evolving contemporary events, but it is at least possible to identify some of the key questions that emerge from the Bush administration's approach to foreign policy-making that are likely to define American hegemony. The great strength of American hegemony for much of the post-war period was that – for allies, at least – it was comparatively benign and offered real advantages for subordinate nations. The

remarkable economic rise of East Asia, for example, and the failure of any East Asian power to challenge American hegemony must be understood in this context (Beeson and Berger 2003). The key question now is whether such patterns of acquiescence in Asia, Europe or even Latin America will continue if the US continues its increasingly unilateral approach to policy-making. At a time of greater international interdependence and economic integration, when new patterns of global governance are emerging that require greater cooperation and coordination between individual states, and between state and non-state actors, the US simply cannot act unilaterally without jeopardising key elements of the international system it has played such a prominent part in creating. Intentionally or unintentionally, therefore, US hegemony will continue to define the intentional order in which it remains such a critical part.

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