American ascendancy: Conceptualizing contemporary hegemony

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Abstract: This paper provides a theoretical framework within which to understand ‘American hegemony’. It reviews the major realist, liberal, Marxist, and constructivist understandings of American power, before arguing that only an eclectic approach to theorizing can capture the multiple aspects of the American ascendancy.


Introduction

It is hardly controversial to claim that the United States is the most powerful country on the planet. Indeed, it has become remarkably commonplace to observe that American power and influence are unprecedented, and that the only parallels for the contemporary ‘unipolar’ order are with the Roman Empire (Cox 2003; Wohlforth 1999). But when set against the global influence of present day America, even Roman power looks modest and decidedly regional by comparison. While the language used to describe the US’s contemporary dominance of the international system can get a little overheated, it is clear that American ‘hyper-power’ is unprecedented in its scope and potential impact. As far as other countries and even regions of the world are concerned, relations with the US have come to assume an unrivalled importance as a consequence.

And yet despite the apparently unambiguous nature of the contemporary American ascendancy, it is not without its paradoxes, puzzles and contradictions. For all the US’s overwhelming military dominance, for example, it has struggled to impose order in Iraq, and cannot unequivocally guarantee security within its own borders. Similarly, while US-based corporations bestride the globe and the domestic economy accounts for about one third of the world’s economic activity, there are still major doubts about the sustainability of private and public debt levels, and concern about America’s dependence on continuing inflows of capital from East Asia in particular. Even at the level of ‘soft power’,1 or the pervasive - if difficult to quantify - influence of ‘American values’ and ‘life-styles’, perceptions of the US have generated a widespread backlash, especially in Islamic societies, and a reassertion of local identity in opposition to an American influence that is seen as corrosive and negative (Barber 2001).

One of the reasons it is difficult to gauge the potential impact of American power is that it is multifaceted; much depends on the issue area, and the specific basis of American influence. Plainly, US military power is quite different in terms of its operation and impact than, say, America’s influence over increasingly important

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1 The idea of soft power, or the benefits that accrue from non-material, ideational and cultural influences has been developed most fully by Nye (2002).
intergovernmental organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which have become such prominent players in the management of the international economic system. The possibility that American power and influence have different bases (and may operate in different ways as a consequence) helps to explain the variety of different theoretical perspectives that are employed to explain it. While the dominant theoretical models – realism, liberalism, Marxism and constructivism – may generally pre-date America’s recent ascendancy, they have all been deployed in an effort to make sense of the contemporary era which seems to have such unique qualities. Consequently, the American ascendancy is as much a test of the efficacy of various theoretical frameworks as it is of our capacity to unpack and gauge the empirical manifestations of the new order.

This chapter critically assesses some of the most influential theoretical perspectives that have attempted to make sense of American dominance. Before embarking on this undertaking, however, I briefly review the current debate about the status of the evolving international order. Has the US become an imperial power, as much of the current literature would suggest, or is it more useful to describe America’s position as ‘hegemonic’, as I argue? The key argument I make is that the complex, multidimensional nature of American hegemony means that its effect and nature varies across, time, space and issue areas, making it difficult for any single paradigm to capture its full impact. Consequently, I argue in the final section that we need to adopt an eclectic approach to theory.

Empire vs. hegemony

When so many observers routinely compare the US’s current position with that of Rome’s, it is unsurprising that American power should also be described as imperial. What is more surprising, perhaps, is that for some observers at least, this is a positive development. For generations of radicals, ‘American imperialism’ was a synonym for a range political, economic and military relations which they saw as exploitative, repressive and responsible for many of the ills of the world - particularly the third world. The picture now, however, looks rather different. Many of the neoconservative figures that have exerted such a powerful influence on American foreign policy under the administration of George W Bush are unabashed advocates of American imperialism, which they see as benevolent and ‘good for a vast portion of the world’s population’ (Kagan 1998: 26).²

Before we can assess the merits of such claims, it is helpful to clarify what exactly imperialism might mean at the present juncture, and whether it is the best way of describing the US’s contemporary preeminence. It is worth remembering that some of the most influential theories of imperialism were developed by Marxist scholars (see Brewer 1990 [1980]), and their preoccupation with economic relations highlights a potentially important element of any imperial relationship. It is not necessary to subscribe to conspiracy theories or one-dimensional caricatures which claim that current American policy is ‘all about oil’ (Klare 2003), to recognize that the Middle East does have a significance that is as much geophysical as it is geopolitical. The

² For a more detailed discussion of the emergence and influence of the ‘neocons’ see Beeson (2004). The subsequent discussion draws heavily on this paper.
theoretical question to ask is whether the US’s relationship with the region generally and with Iraq in particular can usefully be characterized as imperial.

Rather than comparing American power with Rome, I think it makes more sense to contrast it with the European imperial experience, especially in the nineteenth century. It was this period, after all, which inaugurated the contemporary ‘global’ era and the patterns of structured relationships that persist to this day (Hirst and Thompson 1996). The dynamics of European imperialism are complex and continue to be debated, but the expansion of capitalism into Africa, the Americas and Asia clearly marked the high-water mark of European power and influence. Crucially, this period helped establish the nation state and the market economy as the defining structures of the contemporary global order. While inter-imperial rivalries amongst the European powers may have provided significant ‘push’ factors, the pursuit of new markets, resources and labour created a compelling ‘pull’. This basic interaction between the developed economies of Western Europe and their far-flung imperial possessions entrenched the classic colonial relationship between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ (Hobsbawm 1987; Chase-Dunn 1998). The defining characteristic of this relationship, and the factor that raises troubling normative and administrative questions, is that it occurs between ‘unequal nations which involve effective subjugation, [and] the actual exercise of influence over behavior’ (Cohen 1974: 15, emphasis in original).

One of the key distinguishing characteristics of an imperial relationship, then, is not just that it predicated on a fundamental inequality of power and influence, but that there will be ‘direct administration of different communities from an imperial centre’ (Watson 1992: 16). In the heyday of European imperialism, what Abernethy (2000: 12-22) calls the ‘triple assault’ of European power, in which a combination of imperial states, the private sector and the church undercut existent patterns of governance, economic organization and identity in the periphery, effectively paved the way for the European domination and political control of the colonies that became the ‘core feature’ of imperialism. The contrast with the US’s position in either the immediate present or the more distant past is striking: firstly, there is an inherent, historically determined and culturally entrenched aversion to the idea of imperialism in the US (Smith 1994); the US actually played a prominent role in accelerating the departure of the former European colonial powers in Southeast Asia (McMahon 1999). Indeed, the US’s conduct toward its own principal colony – the Philippines – provides a revealing insight into the nature of American as opposed to European power: at one level, when the US granted independence to the Philippines in 1946, it marked the first example of Western decolonization in the post-war Asia-Pacific. At another level, however, the complex web of economic, political and security relationships that have bound the Philippines to the US (see Hutchcroft 1998), illustrate the very different nature of American power and its operation in the contemporary international system – prior to the current Bush administration, at least.

Consequently, America’s colonial relationship with the Philippines highlights a broader point: American power in the post-war period has not been exercised directly in the manner of the European colonial powers, but has generally been mediated by and diffused through an array of intervening, nominally independent, institutions. This is not to say that the US has not exerted a powerful influence of the course of economic and political development in the Philippines. On the contrary, it has. But it
has done so not through the auspices of viceroys, consuls or governors general, but through the more diffuse mechanisms of the international political-economy and a system of strategic alliances and security relations that vest formal authority and autonomy in sovereign states. In short, American power has been hegemonic, rather than imperial.

Before saying anything about the way hegemony (as opposed to imperialism) actually operates, it is important to note the historical context within which both modes of rule have unfolded. It is no coincidence that the high point of imperial rule occurred in the nineteenth century, when the expansion of direct rule and the concomitant control of key economic resources that this facilitated had a certain ineluctable logic. A number of factors – the dangers of inter-imperial conflict, the emergence of new forms of economic domination and control, and the profound ideational transformation that has rendered imperialism illegitimate – have fundamentally undercut the logic of territorial expansion. This transformation is captured in the rise of the ‘trading state’, which eschews military might in favor of commercial power and which – for a moment, at least - seemed the quintessential expression of the new global capitalist order (Rosecrance 1986). Although military power remains a critical element of American power and influence, especially under the present Bush regime, Giovanni Arrighi identifies something important about the underlying logics that have historically informed state actions in the twentieth century in particular:

Territorialist rulers identify power with the extent and populousness of their domains, and conceive of wealth/capital as a means or by-product of the pursuit of territorial expansion. Capitalist rulers, in contrast, identify power with the extent of their command over scarce resources and consider territorial acquisitions as a means and a by-product of the accumulation of capital (Arrighi 1994: 33).

Despite the significance some observers have attached to Iraq’s geo-strategic position as source of cheap energy supplies (Mann 2003), the Iraqi adventure is something of an anomaly and may yet prove to be the exception rather than the rule. For all America’s overwhelming military dominance – especially since the end of the Cold War – American policymakers have generally subscribed to a ‘capitalist’, as opposed to a ‘territorialist’ logic, preferring to shape an economic order in which US-based companies and economic entities can expand and compete off-shore, rather than directly seeking to control foreign territory and resources. Indeed, it is significant that in the 1990s, the economic and strategic elements of American foreign policy became more discrete as the strategic imperative appeared to decline and economic competition became the primary preoccupation of policy-makers everywhere (Mastanduno 1998). In this regard, it is important to note that in the post S11 environment, the former pattern of relations in which the economic and security elements of American foreign policy are intended to ‘reinforce each other in a mutually beneficial way’ has been largely reinstated (Lake 1999: 186). Indeed, the distinctive feature of the current Bush administration may have been to securitize America’s economic and foreign policies in a manner that has not been seen since the height of the Cold War (Higgott 2004).

It is possible to identify a number of different foreign policy traditions in the US (Mead 2001). When combined with competing domestic influences (Trubowitz 1998), this means that policy will always be subject to change and revision. Yet the US’s
current, structurally embedded position, in which it accounts for a about a third of
global GDP and an even larger proportion of spending on defence (Economist 2002),
means that engagement with the world is simply unavoidable. Isolationism is simply
not an option. The only issue is about the manner of this engagement. Even if it is
accepted that hegemony is potentially a better way of conceptualizing America’s
preeminent position, it is clear that there are significantly different elements to this
dominance. Most fundamentally, military power may operate and be utilized in very
different ways to economic and political influence. In order to try and make sense of
these distinctive, albeit increasingly reconnected areas of activity, we need to consider
the way that the idea of hegemony itself has been seen from a variety of theoretical
viewpoints.

Theorizing hegemony

The word hegemony is of Greek origin and originally referred to the dominance of
one state over others in the international system. While this might seen an
unremarkable idea, as we shall see, not all those who now employ the term think that
this state-centric focus is any longer useful or appropriate. As I suggested earlier, one
of the distinguishing characteristics of American hegemony has been the ability of
colicymakers in the US to pursue ‘American interests’ through a variety of indirect
means, either through the auspices of formally independent intergovernmental
organisations like the IMF and the WTO, or by helping to establish the ‘rules of the
game’ that govern international commerce in ways that are judged to favour
American-based economic interests and actors (Beeson and Bell forthcoming).

At one level this reflects the bifurcation between security and political-economic
issues noted above. But even in a more narrowly demarcated security sphere,
American strategic policy is not solely reliant on the direct application of military
power to achieve particular goals. American’s relationship with Japan, for example,
provides a powerful illustration of the way generations of Japanese policymakers have
been influenced by an array of underlying cultural and normative influences that have
shaped policy outcomes in ways that transcend simple state-to-state relations or
formal diplomatic practice (Green 2001; Katzenstein 1996). Indeed, the way
American policymakers approached the countries of East Asia in the post-war period,
and their concomitant preference for a bilateral regional security architecture centred
on Washington, reflects a range of normative and cultural assumptions that did not
apply to the US’s relations with Europe (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002). Such initial
observations serve to alert us to the possibility that American power may operate in
different ways, at different levels, depending on the different issue areas involved.
The particular issues we choose to focus upon, combined with the theoretical lenses
through which we examine them, help to account for the very different conclusions
observers come to about the nature and impact of American power.

Realism

The most enduring tradition of scholarship seeking to explain international relations
in general and hegemony in particular is, of course, realism. The major assumptions
of realist scholarship are sufficiently well known to need no rehearsal here (see, for
example, Morgenthau 1972 [1948]), but it is important to acknowledge that for all its
much-criticized methodological simplifications and shortcomings, it remains both a
powerful influence on the both the conduct of, and (especially in the US) thinking about, America’s international relations (Smith 2002). Moreover, at this historical juncture, when security concerns are privileged above all else, it is a potentially important part of an explanation of American foreign policy.

The economist Charles Kindleberger was largely responsible for reviving interest in the concept of hegemony during the 1970s. Despite the fact that, as we shall see, some of Kindleberger’s ideas have a distinctly ‘liberal’ quality, he is usually placed in the neo-realist camp (Hay 2002: 21), mainly because of his claim that it was necessary for the dominant country of an era to ‘set the standard of conduct for other countries’, thus overcoming the pitfalls of anarchy and the potentially destructive pursuit of narrow national interests (Kindleberger 1973: 28). It was the failure of the US to assume this hegemonic or leadership role in the inter-war period that caused the catastrophic economic collapse of the 1930s, according to Kindleberger. One of the things that sets Kindelberger apart from more orthodox realists with political science backgrounds, is his belief that hegemonic leadership can produce a positive sum game in which all benefit from trade-led economic expansion.

Conventional realists, by contrast, are famously pessimistic about the nature of international relations. This explains the preoccupation with relative gains and the fear that other countries economic development is potentially alarming rather than mutually uplifting. As Samuel Huntington succinctly points out, economists are ‘out in left field’, theoretically speaking, ‘because they are blind to the fact that economic activity is a source of power as well as well-being’ (Huntington 1993: 72). In the zero sum universe inhabited by realists, economic power is a critical determinant of relative state power. Consequently, the rise of Japan, according to Huntington (1993: 72), was something ‘Americans have every reason to be concerned about’. More recently, other realist scholars have expressed similar alarm about the rise of China, leading one noted realist to argue that ‘the United States has a profound interest in seeing Chinese economic growth slow considerably in the years ahead’ (Mearsheimer 2001: 402). While this marks a welcome recognition of the importance of economic power, it is remarkably pessimistic and, as we shall see, sharply at odds with liberal understandings of economic development and integration. The importance of realist readings of economic development in the context of this discussion lies in its potential influence on policy: the long-standing desire to ‘contain’ China, for example, is clearly driven by realist assumptions about the inevitability of conflict as a consequence of changes in the distribution of economic weight and power.

Such assumptions are prominent in the work of Robert Gilpin, one of the most influential theorists in the realist camp, and one who takes the economic dimension of international dominance and competition seriously. In Gilpin’s (1987; 1981) view, the international system is characterized by competition between the major powers of a particular era as they seek to dominate their rivals and impose their preferred vision of international order; a vision that reflects national interests, but which may produce stability until the hegemon’s position is inevitably challenged by a new rising power. In this regard, hegemonic powers are victims of their own success: the provision of the public goods they underwrite may benefit them, but it also benefits rivals and brings about a redistribution of power in the international system. The international system is consequently characterized by inevitable cyclical competition that is the
product of underlying transformations of material power and control of key, leading-edge technologies (see Schwartz 1994; Goldstein 1988).

Whatever one may think of the implicit teleology of such analyses and the relative neglect of non-material factors in determining influence in the international system, the military and technological preeminence that the US currently enjoys is plainly a crucial part of its dominance of the international system (Posen 2003; Wohlforth 2002). Given that the neoconservative advisors that have influenced policy under the Bush administration are ‘realists to the core’ (Lieven 2002), it is perhaps unsurprising that American foreign policy should have assumed a more unilateral and militarized form. The key point to stress is that, the logic of the ‘neocon’ approach flows directly from a realist reading of international system and America’s place in it. Consequently, the policies it generates are not only applicable to Iraq.

Although the application of policy may be different, the same rationale informs policy prescriptions toward China and the desire to inhibit its growth and potential for hegemonic rivalry for as long as possible (Mearsheimer 2001). Ironically enough, however, a thoroughgoing realist reading of US-China relations suggests that it might be too late: China’s economic expansion has already established a mutual interdependency with the US in which China recycles its massive trade surplus to buy American debt (Goodman 2003). Neither side can easily disentangle itself from this mutually beneficial nexus of interdependency. Unlike Britain in the nineteenth century, America’s position as a net importer of capital severely constrains its potential foreign policy leverage (Ferguson 2002). For all its apparent might and dominance, therefore, a realist reading of American hegemony suggests that there are structurally embedded economic weaknesses in the American position which threaten to undermine its long-term position and make Iraq-style adventures simply unsupportable (Ferguson and Kotlikoff 2003).

**Liberalism**

The sort of transnational economic engagement that increasingly characterizes US-Asia relations is generally seen as a ‘good thing’ by liberals, an inevitable corollary of greater interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1977), and a potential constraint on military conflict (Russett 1995). Although there are some important distinctions between different strands of liberal thought, especially its economic and political variants, the key point to emphasize, as Richardson (2001: 9) reminds us, is that liberals in the US invariably ‘assume that liberal norms and institutions are essentially benign and conducive to the good of peoples throughout the world’. This underlying assumption about the rectitude and potentially universal appeal of liberal ideas has provided a major impetus for the promotion of a particular world order in the period since the end of World War II, when America assumed a dominant, not to say, hegemonic position. Part of this dominance, as far as liberals are concerned, is derived from the inherently attractive nature of American values and the concomitant ability to ‘set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others’ (Nye 2002: 9). While it is difficult to quantify - and easy to overestimate - the impact of ‘soft power’, ‘America’ plainly was, and is an attractive idea for many outside the US, creating a potentially important source of influence for American policymakers and

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3 The nature of the ‘international system’ is taken up in more detail in the final section.
economic elites. It is an indictment of contemporary policy that attitudes toward the US have changed so dramatically (Sardar and Davies 2002), and a tacit indicator of the declining influence of liberal ideas in American policy-making circles (Higgott 2004).

Yet, for much of the Cold War period, liberal ideas were the normative and programmatic bedrock of American foreign policy. The story of the creation of the post-war order and the distinctive array of institutions that emerged to govern increasingly transnational economic activities and entrench specific security relations is well known and has been detailed elsewhere (Latham 1997). What merits emphasis here is that while liberals tend to focus primarily on the political-economic and institutional aspects of hegemonic power (Keohane 1984), the post-war order that the US played such a pivotal role in creating has from the outset been profoundly shaped by a wider geo-strategic context. Not only did the confrontation with the Soviet Union determine the nature of the over-arching security order within which the liberal economic order was nested, but the Cold War confrontation effectively reconstituted the American state as well (Hogan 1998). In other words, while liberals may be right to highlight the distinctive, highly institutionalized nature of the post-war economic and political order, it was created within, and largely a response to, an overarching bipolar strategic and ideological confrontation.

Paradoxically, the overwhelming material power possessed by both sides meant that direct superpower conflict was unthinkable (Mueller 1989). This strategic stand-off gave a particular prominence to political and economic factors, and helps explain the focus on the institutions of governance that emerged as part of the so-called Bretton Woods regime (Eichengreen and Kenen 1994). Arguably the most important and persuasive liberal theorist of the distinctive post-war order in which intergovernmental organizations like the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO have assumed such prominent positions is John Ikenberry. Two aspects of Ikenberry’s understanding of American hegemony are worth emphasizing. First, and in keeping with the realist position, wars and their aftermaths provide moments in which new hegemonic orders can be established. Indeed, Ikenberry’s view of change in the international system is in accord with the state-centric, cyclical view of Giplin, who he cites approvingly. What distinguishes Ikenberry’s position, and this is the second point to stress, is that material power is ‘tamed’ within a constitutionalised order (Ikenberry 2001b: 29). In this schema, states are bound by the ‘rules of the game’, which establish limits to the way states can act legitimately. Significantly, not only are these ‘rules’ based on ‘shared agreement’, according to Ikenberry (2001b: 31), but they bind the hegemon in ways that reassure other actors. Crucially, not only is the rule-governed, institutionalized order able to overcome what realists take to be the inescapably anarchical nature of the international system, but it is system from which all benefit, creating a degree of path-dependency that only some future major crisis is likely to transform (Ikenberry 1998).

As we shall see, there are striking parallels in this vision and the views of some ‘neo-Gramscian’ and constructivist scholars who are also interested in the role of ideas, institutions and power. What generally distinguishes liberals, however, is the assumption that the post-war liberal international order which American power has underpinned is normatively desirable and benign. There is often little recognition that the sorts of ‘neoliberal’, market-oriented policies that have been actively promoted in
places like East Asia - where very different economic relationships and structures have developed – are not just resented, but expressions of specifically *American* rather than universal interests (see Wade 2001). This is especially important when we remember that one of the key claims that Ikenberry makes about the post-war order is that its apparent durability is in large part a function of its legitimacy. Now, however, when the IFIs and their relationship with the US are the subjects of trenchant criticism (Woods 2003), and when American foreign policy is systematically undermining the very basis of the multilateral order that was such a distinctive part of the post-war era, then even liberals like Ikenberry have questioned whether the specific pattern of institutionalized dominance can endure (Ikenberry 2004).

**Marxism**

While some may think it slightly anachronistic to devote discussion to Marxist theories of hegemony, scholars working under this broad rubric have provided some of the most important and persuasive accounts of American power. Given the central place of historical materialism in Marxist thinking, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are some similarities with realist understandings of power. However, it has been ‘neo-Gramscian’ scholars more influenced by Antonio Gramsci than Karl Marx that have provided some of the most innovative and important recent explanations of contemporary hegemony.

The most important figure amongst the neo-Gramscians is Robert Cox, whose work links the original Marxist preoccupation with modes of production, material conditions and class forces, with an interest in ideology and the role of ideas. In a seminal article published nearly a quarter of a century ago, Cox (1981) suggested how material capabilities, institutions and ideas formed a complex, reciprocal and interactive whole, in which institutions provided a way of perpetuating particular international orders. Significantly, Cox placed much emphasis on the inter-subjective, shared nature of social meaning, in ways that have subsequently been elaborated by constructivists and theorists of global governance (see Onuf 1989; Rosenau 1992). What distinguished Cox’s Marxist-derived theorization is that ideas are ultimately tied to specific historical circumstances and class relations. Hegemony may be about material power, as realists claim, it may also depend on institutions for its perpetuation, as liberals argue, but as far as Cox is concerned hegemony is ultimately about the ideological legitimation of particular class interests. Crucially, however, and in striking sympathy with Ikenberry, the dominant state

> creates an order based ideologically on a broad measure of consent, functioning according to general principles that in fact ensure the continuing supremacy of the leading state or states and leading social classes but at the same time offer[ing] some measure or prospect of satisfaction to the less powerful (Cox 1987: 7).

Like liberals, therefore, Cox recognizes that for hegemony to be durable there must be something in it for the dominated. Unlike liberals, though, the basis of hegemonic domination is no longer associated exclusively with a hegemonic state, but with the development of a ‘transnational managerial class’ (Cox 1987: 359-60). From the perspective of orthodox Marxism, the idea that class structures might become transnational as a consequence of the ‘globalization’ of underlying economic activity is perhaps unsurprising (Robinson and Harris 2000). What is more surprising are the
implications this may have for the nature of hegemony. Although there is no consensus amongst radical scholars about quite what this might mean in the long run, the idea that we might be witnessing the emergence of a ‘global state’ and the ‘unification of core world state functions’ (Shaw 2000: 17), or that we live in an era when no state can ‘form the center of an imperialist project’ (Hardt and Negri 2000: xiv), captures something about the nature of emerging ‘post-state’ debates to which critical scholars have made significant contributions.

One of the great advantages of some of the Marxist-inspired theories of hegemony is their potential capacity to escape the ‘territorial trap’, or the preoccupation with geographically delimited political boundaries and notions of state sovereignty that are central to realism and much liberal thought, too. This is especially the case in the international political economy where neoliberal policies and practices have assumed a centrality that transcends, and is not exclusively dependent on nation states, for their continuing dominance (Agnew and Corbridge 1995). Like liberals, neo-Gramscians recognize the importance institutions have in ‘locking-in’ particular ideas and practices as part of a constitutionalized world order (Gill 1998). Where they depart from liberals, of course, is in their reading of the impact of such practices, which they consider inequitable and exploitative. Whether one agrees with this interpretation of neoliberalism’s impact or not, radical scholarship has cast an illuminating light on the evolution of the international political-economy, and the way American-based economic interests may benefit from specific transnational regulatory orders. Where they are less convincing, is in linking the geo-economic to the geo-strategic.

Stephen Gill’s (2003) analysis of American ‘grand strategy’, for example, suggests that it is conducted in coordination with G7 allies, and is the consequence of the ‘calculated relation of means to the containment of large contradictions’. The nature of contemporary American unilateralism clearly present a major problem for this sort of claim. Even in the likely event that the unilateral impulse proves unsustainable - for the sorts of mundane economic reasons radical scholars have long emphasized (Brenner 2002) – the US clearly enjoys a degree of military dominance that allows it to act in ways that are simply not possible for any other country (Bacevich 2002). Moreover, and problematically, for the radical case, American foreign policy has recently had the effect of compromising and diminishing the highly institutionalized multilateral system that American-based interests have directly benefited from (Johnson 2004).4 In other words, while radical scholars can tell us a great deal about how US-based economic interests can benefit form the regulatory regime created under the auspices of American hegemony, and about the way in which a constitutionalized form of hegemony might actually work, they are less good at accounting for the recent securitization of US foreign policy. A similar problem confronts constructivists.

Constructivism

Constructivism ‘is about human consciousness and its role in international life’ (Ruggie 1998: 856). While this definition has something in common with both liberal and Gramscian emphases on the role of ideas, norms and values in shaping the

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4 The US’s failure to sign the Kyoto agreement, its opposition to the International Criminal Court, its unilateral abrogation of arms control treaties, and the push for bilateral rather than multilateral trade agreements are some of the more important examples of this process.
behavior of states and other international actors, constructivism pushes the potential importance of the ideational a good deal further. According to Alexander Wendt, perhaps the most widely known, if not necessarily the most representative exponent of the constructivist position (see Reus-Smit 2002), ‘the most important structures in which states are embedded are made of ideas, not material forces. Ideas determine the meaning and content of power, the strategies by which states pursue their interests, and interests themselves’ (Wendt 1999: 309). The arrow of causation for constructivists points in the opposite direction than it does for both realists and Marxists, for whom ideas are ultimately epiphenomena and reflective of underlying material or structural forces. It is this fundamental claim about the potential that ideas have to determine both interests and the way they are pursued that underpinned Ruggie’s seminal insight into the nature of post-war American hegemony. For Ruggie what was critical about American power and the distinctive international order it helped create ‘was less the fact that of American hegemony that accounts for the explosion of multilateral arrangements than it was American hegemony’ (Ruggie 1993: 568, emphasis in original). Put differently, America’s overwhelming structural power and material assets gave US policymakers the capacity to re-shape the post-war order, but the precise form this took reflected particularly American ideas and a normative preferences for a liberal, institutionalized and multilateral order.

The potential importance of a constructivist reading of the administration of George W Bush is clear. Given the widely noted influence that a relatively small coterie of influential neoconservative intellectuals have had on the Bush administration’s foreign policy agenda, it is evident that ideas continue to matter (Mann 2004). Indeed, the ending of the Cold War, the demise of bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union, and America’s apparently overwhelming material dominance have created a space in which ideas may matter more than ever: freed from the constraints of superpower confrontation, policymakers have had the opportunity to create policies that reflected more narrowly conceived ‘American’ interests – something that explains the ascendancy of geo-economics over geopolitics during the 1990s (Luttwak 1998). What is distinctive about the administration of George W Bush, however, is the long-standing desire to apply American power unilaterally to create a particular form of international order in which the US ‘has the strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them’ (Krauthammer 1990-1991: 33). The subsequent retreat from multilateralism and the embrace of the doctrine of pre-emption become easier to understand in the light of this ideational shift that significantly pre-dates the ‘war on terror’.

Thus far there have been surprisingly few constructivist-inspired analyses of the evolution of American foreign policy since 9/11. An important exception is Chris Reus-Smit’s *American Power and World Order*, which argues that for American hegemony to be sustainable it must be ‘socially embedded’ (Reus-Smit 2004: 6). In some ways the approach of constructivists like Reus-Smit is not unlike that of liberals and Gramscians, which emphasize the importance of institutionalization and ideational legitimacy in effectively constitutionalising specific international orders (see Reus-Smit 1999; Gill 1998). What is distinctive and useful about the constructivist reading of American foreign policy that Reus-Smit has recently developed, however, is the recognition of the socially-constructed nature of effective and sustainable hegemony:
Hegemony must be seen as a form of social hierarchy, based on status and recognition. It must be cemented by generally recognized procedural and substantive norms, and these norms must reflect the negotiation of the hegemon’s and other states’ identities and interests. Furthermore, the hegemon must pursue its interests in a manner consistent with these norms, or the legitimacy of its leadership will fast erode. To construct such a hegemony in a world as complex as today’s demands a quality of statesmanship as yet unapparent in the “gunboat” diplomacy of the Bush administration (Reus-Smit 2004: 102).

The contrast between the contemporary expression of American hegemony and earlier forms is striking, and raises questions about the durability of hegemony under the Bush administration given the remarkable rise of anti-Americanism over the past couple of years (PRC 2004; Sardar and Davies 2002). Constructivism highlights and explains a widely noted paradox of American power (Nye 2002): despite its material dominance, American unilateralism and the concomitant decline of legitimacy this engenders, significantly raises the transaction costs associated with the pursuit of foreign policy goals. The reluctance of key allies to assist the US in its increasingly expensive and open-ended adventure in Iraq is perhaps the most telling example of this possibility (Gordon and Shapiro 2004). But the Bush administration’s capacity to alienate formerly unequivocal allies is not confined to Western Europe; in East Asia, too, the consolidation of regional relationships in response to American economic and even security policy suggests that the US no longer enjoys either the legitimacy or the authority it once did (Beeson 2003b). While this may look like the sort of ‘balancing’ realist theory has long-predicted (Waltz 1993), it is important to recognize that it is not occurring in a narrowly demarcated security sphere as such analyses might lead us to expect. On the contrary, in yet another paradox of American power, the US’s military dominance is not only unlikely to directly threaten other democracies and allies, but its material ascendancy is being offset by regional collaboration, non-cooperation and the construction of ‘counter-hegemonic discourses’ designed to question, if not undermine American policy.

**Conceptualizing American Hegemony**

Trying to make sense of the construction and impact of US foreign policy and the more generalized consequences of America’s structural power and cultural influence is clearly a complex undertaking. The multi-dimensional nature of ‘America’s’ impact on the world suggests that no single paradigm is likely to provide a complete explanation of contemporary hegemony. Indeed, as Katzenstein and Okawara (2001/02: 154) argue, ‘[t]he complex links between power, interest, and norms defy analytical capture by any one paradigm. They are made more intelligible by drawing selectively on different paradigms – that is, by analytical eclecticism, not parsimony’. The following attempt to conceptualize American hegemony is undertaken in this eclectic spirit and, despite the potentially incommensurable nature of the paradigms discussed earlier, draws on a number of approaches. The central claim made here is that an eclectic approach allows us to gain a clearer understanding of the multifaceted temporal and spatial dimensions of American power as it affects multiple arenas.

The major justification for adopting an eclectic approach is derived from the range of issue areas affected by the US, and the sheer durability of American power - the declinist literature of the 1980s and early 1990s notwithstanding (see Keohane 1984;
Kennedy 1989). While both Marxists and liberals may be right to point to potential economic vulnerabilities on the one hand (Brenner 2002), or the declining efficacy of America’s ideational influence on the other (Nye 2002-03), the military dominance realists emphasize is not just a critical element of America’s structurally-embedded paramountcy, it allows the US to behave in ways that are simply impossible for any other nation. The point to emphasize at this stage is that the efficacy and importance of military (or any other form of) power varies as a consequence of the historically specific geo-political context in which it unfolds on the one hand, and the policy priorities of a particular regime on the other. This dialectical interaction between domestic factors and the US’s hegemonic role exerts a powerful influence over the international system within which American power is embedded.

Barry Buzan and Richard Little (2000) have usefully suggested that the international system is constituted by a dynamic interaction between military, political, economic and societal sectors. In light of the earlier review of theories of hegemony, it is useful to consider the nature of American hegemony in these four contexts, in order to develop both a clearer understanding of the nature, extent and efficacy of American power in the contemporary period, as well a sense of the relative usefulness of the various theories of hegemony.

**Military power**

One of the most distinctive aspects of America’s strategic position is its unprecedented global reach, and the huge lead the US enjoys in terms of technological sophistication and military hardware. Realists rightly draw attention to the importance of strategic considerations in understanding American dominance: American hegemony was initiated by the Second World War, and the distinctive liberal order that US hegemony helped to create in its aftermath occurred within the overarching context of the Cold War. Consequently, two temporal considerations are especially germane here: first, American actions, especially during the early phases of the Cold War (as both liberals and Gramscians point out), enjoyed a good deal of legitimacy – at least amongst key allies. In other words, the specific geo-political dynamics of the Cold War constrained and gave a particular direction to American grand strategy, one that is strikingly different to the contemporary period. This leads to a second point: despite the ending of the Cold War and the beginning of an era of ‘unipolarity’, there has been little winding back of the spatial distribution or reach of American military power. On the contrary, what Chalmers Johnson (2004) describes as an ‘empire of bases’ has become a permanent, highly institutionalized part of America’s overall strategic position.5

One of the continuities of American hegemony, then, has been an accelerating pursuit of military dominance and what Bacevich (2002: 49) has described as the increasing militarization of foreign policy. The actions of the present Bush administration have dramatically highlighted the continuing importance of America’s military power, and provided a telling reminder about the importance of agency: the doctrine of pre-emption and the willingness to act unilaterally are distinctive qualities of the Bush administration and testimony to the ideational impact of the ‘neo-con’ advisors that have assumed prominent positions in the Bush administration (Mann 2004). The Bush

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5 It should be noted that at the time of writing, the US has foreshadowed a major redeployment of American forces with major reductions in Europe and East Asia.
administration also highlights the way military and economic interests can intersect within a particular administration to shape policy outcomes (Phillips 2004). Consequently, as observers like Bacevich and former National Security Advisor to the Carter administration, Zbigniew Brzezinski, point out, America’s promotion of global economic liberalism and pursuit of military domination are deeply inter-linked elements of the US’s overall hegemonic position. Crucially, however, even arch realists like Brzezinski (2004: 143) recognize that without legitimacy both the application of military power and the larger project of liberal globalization are imperiled.

Before considering this ideational dimension of American power, it is useful to highlight briefly America’s evolving strategic relationship with East Asia, which is considered in more detail elsewhere in this volume. While it is plain that American’s role in the Cold War, especially in Korea and Vietnam, profoundly affected political, economic and strategic development within East Asia, and the nature of intra-regional relations, too (Cumings 1997), it is also clear that this is not simply a structurally-determined function of the international order. Not only have American attitudes toward security issues in East Asia been sharply different to those in Western Europe (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002), but East Asians also have distinctive views about security issues that may ultimately place them at odds with the US. On the one hand, the distinctive, more all-encompassing notions of security that prevail in East Asia are unlike those that prevail in ‘the west’ (Alagappa 1998); on the other, it has been argued that the historical basis of international relations in East Asia has also been very different from the Western European model that has provided the basis for most contemporary intentional relations theory. As David Kang (2003) points out, the traditional China-centric order in East Asia was the exact opposite of what western international relations theory would lead us to expect, and characterized by informal inequality overlaid by formal hierarchy. It is not necessary to think that East Asia is inevitably reverting to this long-standing ‘natural’ order to recognize that the seemingly inexorable rise of China in combination with a decline in American legitimacy creates a new, unpredictable environment, which our current theoretical models may find difficult to explain. While realism rightly highlights the continuing importance of American military power generally, and of its direct strategic engagement with and presence in East Asia in particular, the key point to stress is that there is nothing inevitable about the way this engagement will play out or the way East Asia will respond to it. Indeed, there is evidence of an emerging normative or ideational shift in East Asia which may presage a major reorientation in the region’s strategic posture and its relations with the US (Alagappa 2003).

**Political-economy and hegemony**

Although Buzan and Little suggest that the political and economic spheres are distinct and should be considered separately, the nature of the contemporary international system generally and the impact of American hegemony in particular make this a somewhat artificial distinction. The idea that politics and economics are inseparable, mutually constitutive parts of larger social realities is well established (Polyani 1957; Strange 1994); the challenge now is construct conceptual frameworks that capture the nature of this interaction at both a national and transnational level, while simultaneously paying attention to the wider geopolitical context within which such interactions occur.
The potential importance of this claim can be seen in the context of East Asia and its interaction with the US. East Asia is characterized by famously (or infamously) close relations between government and business, which highlight just how artificial the attempted analytical separation of politics and economics actually is. However, the salient point here is that institutions like the ‘developmental state’, which Japan pioneered and which has been widely emulated to varying degrees across the region, are unlikely to have prospered in quite the way they did without the Cold War and the particular strategic priorities adopted by the Americans (Beeson forthcoming). Not only did the US adopt a more tolerant attitude toward mercantilist, statist practices of which American policymakers had little sympathy, but the creation of a liberal, dynamic international economy provided the opportunity for much of the region to develop through export-oriented industrialization.

Adopting a more temporally and spatially-informed approach to both the international political economy and the impact of American hegemony upon it has a number of advantages. First, it highlights both the way in which international economic restructuring has brought about a change in both the way economic activity is organized and coordinated (Ruigrok and van Tulder 1995), and the diversity and influence of private sector actors in the regulation of the contemporary international system (Braithwaite and Drahos 2000). One of the most important consequences of the evolving relationship between political and economic power is its increased transnationalisation and the subsequent erosion of the link between geographically demarcated, immobile political communities of fate, and potentially mobile economic actors. In short, power is not exclusively political, nor is it coterminous with national boundaries (Agnew 2002). Some observers contend that the globalization of economic – and by necessity, political – activity is generating changes ‘comparable in scope to the transition from the feudal epoch to the modern Westphalian system’ (Korbin 2002: 43). What is clear, is that international restructuring is changing the way economic activity is organized, and the power of states relative to economic actors. While there is a major debate about just how far this process has gone, and major differences in the capacities of individual states, it is clear that the private sector is taking increasing responsibility for making authoritative decisions and influencing policy across an array of areas that were formerly the preserve of states (Cutler, Haufler and Porter 1999).

The second advantage of taking history and geography seriously, then, is that it alerts us to the differential impact of a range of processes that are associated with and driven by American power or, more accurately, by specific interests that are able to shape US foreign and economic policy at particular moments. Marxists, or radical scholars more generally, have gone furthest in developing a framework that attempts to explain the way that the transnational economic restructuring has led to a concomitant transnationalisation of political power of class forces (Cox 1987; Robinson and Harris 2000). Despite the fact that such analyses generally understate the wider geopolitical and strategic contexts within which such relationships operate, they do highlight something important about the way particular interests can shape policy and about the significance about ideational or ideological legitimacy in underpinning a particular order. The influence of financial sector interests over recent American policy in East

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6 There is an extensive literature which considers the role of the state and the possible impact of ‘globalisation’.
Asia, which continued to lobby for further liberalization despite accumulating evidence of its negative and destabilizing impact, is a telling example of the first possibility (Beeson 2003a). Similarly, the systematic discursive demolition of the legitimacy of the Asian developmental state undertaken in the aftermath of the financial crisis illustrates how predominantly US-based economic interests and ideas were mobilized to marginalize Asian alternatives to the dominant neoliberal American model (Hall 2003).

The precise way that ‘American power’ has been exercised in the international political-economy has, therefore, varied over time, reflecting both the constraints of geopolitics, the fluctuating influence of particular economic interests, and the position of the IFIs, which have been such an important part in promoting and enforcing neoliberalism. What is most striking at present, however, is that the renewed emphasis on security issues post-9/11 has changed both American foreign policy and its impact on the rest of the world. In Southeast Asia, which it is supposedly at the forefront of the ‘war on terror’, strategic cooperation is becoming a prerequisite of economic aid and trade and reconfiguring inter-state and domestic relations across the region as a consequence (Beeson 2004). But if there are echoes of the Cold War in contemporary policy, there are also important differences that highlight the ambiguous position the US occupies at the center of the international system.

Socio-cultural hegemony?
The final7 element of Buzan and Little’s depiction of the international system is the societal or socio-cultural sector. Assessing the impact of something as imprecise as ‘culture’ is inevitably fraught, but it does highlight another potentially important, if contradictory impact of American power.

At one level there is clearly a significant overlap with both liberal and Gramscian scholars who emphasize the importance of ‘soft power’ and/or ideology in promoting a particular world view or in institutionalizing a specific set of norms and values (Nye 2002; Gill 1998). At another level, however, arguments about the potential impact of ‘cultural’ influences can be far grander and all-encompassing, and involve claims that are either insupportably teleological at worst or highly Eurocentric at best (Fukuyama 1992; von Laue 1987). While such claims may look wildly overblown and neglect the actual history of technological and economic development in which East Asia played such a prominent part (Hobson 2004), ‘the West’ generally and the US in particular clearly have had a disproportionate influence over the course of recent history and the development of the international system. Indeed, it is precisely as a consequence of this influence and the US's unique capacity to affect the evolution of processes associated with globalization that leads Ikenberry to argue that the US ought to be uniquely qualified and positioned to take advantage of the very system it helped to create (Ikenberry 2001a).

And yet for all the attention that is paid to the US’s dominance of the information and entertainment sectors of the international economy, it is evident that not only is this cultural hegemony frequently resented, but it’s impact is at best incomplete (Barber 2001; PRC 2004). Consequently, it may be more useful to speak of world culture as a

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7 It should be noted that in Buzan and Little’s original formulation they also included the environmental sector, but a consideration of its significance is beyond the scope of this chapter and the competence of its author.
specific repertoire of institutions, practices and purposes generated and sustained by states and social systems (Boli and Thomas 1999). Such a formulation usefully directs our attention toward the complex, multi-level, multi-actor nature of contemporary processes of ‘global governance’. What we need to add to these approaches, however, and what emerges from a consideration of the US’s specific historical role in the development of such a system, is that hegemonic power continues to exert a powerful, sometimes decisive force on the evolving international order. This is most dramatically obvious, of course, in the security sphere, and exemplified by the US’s present doctrine of preemption. It is also important to recognize that the US can exert a more pervasive, comparatively subtle long-term influence at this more diffuse cultural level as it encourages the adoption of a particular set of economic practices. The persistence of varieties of capitalism should not blind us to the fact that, as Susan Strange (Strange 1997) pointed out, the differences in broadly capitalist orders are less significant than the similarities. The importance of this insight is confirmed by China’s accession to the WTO (Fewsmith 2001): the capitulation of the last significant alternative to the ubiquitous capitalist model is arguably as significant as the ending of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union.8 It is an event that the US was significantly responsible for, and from which it stands to gain enormously at a strategic, economic, political and ideational level. One of the most important manifestations of cultural hegemony is in bringing about these sorts of long-term changes in the underlying assumptions that political elites have about the most appropriate way of organizing economic – and by implication – social activity. This more diffuse, subtle and long-term consequence of American hegemony has been one of its most important. Remarkably, the recent emphasis on material power at both a theoretical and policy level means it is also one of the most under-appreciated.

**Concluding remarks**

The potential importance of America’s ideational influence and legitimacy, as well as the limits of material power, are clearly observable in Iraq. Realists may be able to explain why the US can act preemptively and win a rapid military victory, but they are less good at explaining why the Bush administration might want to invade Iraq in the first place, or why they are having such a difficult time suppressing opposition to their presence. They are also less convincing in accounting for the responses to American unilateralism. In Europe and East Asia there are signs of growing unease about American policy, and an erosion of American authority as a consequence (Daalder 2003; Beeson 2003b).

To understand why US policy is increasingly seen as illegitimate, frequently contested, and arguably far less effective than it once was, we need to recognize how it has evolved over the last fifty years or so. Seen in a longer time-frame, the extent of the transformation that has occurred under the Bush administration becomes clearer – but so do some continuities. True, unilateralism, preemption and a preference for military rather than diplomatic solutions to difficult international issues are distinctive qualities of the present administration. But the structurally embedded influence that flows from American military power, economic weight and political leverage are

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8 It is important to recognise the extent of the changes China’s admission to the WTO implies, including re-writing the national constitution to accommodate the requirements of market-centred economic activity. See, Fewsmith (2001).
factors that pre-date this administration, as is the commitment to liberalism and openness that characterized earlier administrations (Bacevich 2002).

To capture the complex reality that is American hegemony we need to adopt an eclectic approach that draws on and synthesizes a number of approaches and theoretical frameworks. In so doing we can begin to recognize how American hegemony has evolved, its differential impact in various parts of the world, and the contingent interaction between the domestic and international aspects of American policy. Such an analysis serves as a powerful reminder of one other aspect of American power that is especially germane to a collection like this: it makes a difference who runs America. Whatever we may think of the Bush administration and its impact on Asia in particular, it serves as a salutary reminder that agency continues to matter, and the hegemonic potential can be realized in distinctive and sometimes troubling ways.
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