

The United States: Still a Global Hegemonic Power?

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Abstract

This article argues that U.S. hegemony has not declined since the end of the Cold War as claimed in much of the international relations literature. On the contrary the post Cold War international political landscape is still characterized by unipolarity in which the U.S. is the sole superpower. However what is questionable is how long the U.S. can sustain its global hegemonic power. The paper begins by discussing how hegemony has been defined. Then, while arguing that the alleged decline of U.S. hegemony by the declinists is too simplistic, the article underlines research that brings the present preponderance of U.S. power in the global politics into question. The article further describes U.S. unprecedented capabilities and its leadership in the security and economic frameworks that have constituted the foundation for the international order to provide empirical evidence to support the assertion that the U.S. remains a global hegemon.

Keywords: *United States, super power, neo-Gramscian, hegemony, declinists, primacist.*

Introduction

The conventional wisdom in much of the international relations literature assumes that there has been a relative decline in American power and hegemony since the end of the Cold War. This article puts forth an argument that U.S. hegemony in the post-Cold War international political landscape has not declined and that it is still characterized by unipolarity in which the U.S. remains the only superpower. But the question of how long the U.S. can sustain its global hegemonic power however remains to be seen. The article will begin by looking at the definitions of hegemony from different perspectives to understand the depth of its meaning. Next, while arguing that the alleged decline of U.S. hegemony encapsulated as ‘the Eagle has landed’¹ by the declinists² is too simplistic, the article highlights research that brings the current preponderance of U.S. power in the world politics into question. It then examines U.S. unprecedented capabilities and its leadership in the security and economic frameworks that have constituted the foundation for the international order to provide empirical evidence supporting the assertion that the U.S. remains a global hegemon. Furthermore, it is argued that despite its current predominance in the international system, the U.S. has challenges ahead to deal with. It is noted that it would be an exaggeration to anticipate that such challenges will be able to shake U.S. hegemony in the foreseeable future; however, the more distant future of ‘Pax Americana’³ remains questionable. It will be concluded that the U.S. is the world’s only remaining superpower, and no single power or

group of powers could pose challenges to U.S. hegemony to date, noting that the prospects for the far future of American hegemony⁴ is an open-ended question due to the fact that there exist both problems and opportunities for American unrivalled capabilities, thus this question needs to be further researched.

Theoretical Traditions of Hegemony: An Overview

The term 'hegemony' comes from the Greek language (*hegemonia*); meaning leadership. In an international system, this leadership is exercised by a hegemon, a nation-state which have sufficient capabilities to fulfill this role. A careful reading of international relations literature shows that the concept of hegemony has been critically examined from such theoretical traditions as hegemonic stability theory, neo-Gramscian and structural power.

The theory of hegemonic stability (HST) is an excellent starting point for the analysis of hegemony as this perspective not only provides a definition of hegemony but also demonstrates the importance of hegemony in the international structure. HST emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and has been echoed since then by U.S. scholars from the realist tradition who assume the distribution of power among states as a main factor in explaining the openness and stability of the international economy.⁵ In his well-known work on the Great Depression of the late 1920s and the 1930s Charles Kindleberger, the father of HST,⁶ argued that 'for the world economy to be stabilized, there has to be a stabilizer, *one* stabilizer.'⁷ Kindleberger revealed the close connection between the depth and duration of the Great Depression to British inability and U.S. unwillingness to play the leadership role of stabilizing the international economy. In the logic, the advocates of HST argue for the great significance of hegemonic role in world politics: A hegemon acts as one stabilizer in the international system. According to HST, the root cause of World War I was the decline of 19th-century British hegemony; Britain was incapable of providing the leadership function of stabilizing the international economy. In a similar vein, it was the absence of leadership during the interwar period that deepened the Great Depression and caused the outbreak of World War II. Thus, crucial in HST is the argument that the international system remains stable only when a single nation-state is able and willing to 'single-handedly dominate the rules and arrangements...[of] international political and economic relations.'⁸ This nation-state is called a hegemon. When a hegemon deploys the leadership either through coercion, negotiation or diplomacy, it is exercising its 'preponderance of power'.⁹

Another theoretical approach to hegemony is labeled neo-Gramscian. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political theorist, has made a considerable contribution in developing the concept of hegemony, proposing that power depends not only on force but also on consent. He defines 'hegemony as the ability of a social group to direct society both politically and morally'.¹⁰ According to Gramsci, a hegemonic group could preserve its predominance not just through violence and political and economic coercion, but also through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the hegemonic group become the shared values of all. Hence, a consensus culture developed by a hegemon helps to maintain the *status quo* rather than revolting.¹¹

Guided by Gramsci's thoughts, the proponents of neo-Gramscian continue to challenge other theories of international relations with respect to global hegemony. In his two seminal articles: 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory' in 1982 and 'Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Article in Method' in 1983, Robert W. Cox, a pioneer of the neo-Gramscian perspective, criticised 'the usual 'problem-solving' theories which do not interrogate the origin, nature and development of historical structures'¹² and developed a critical theory of hegemony, world order and historical change. Cox observes that the status of hegemony within a world order is 'based on a coherent conjunction or fit between a configuration of material power, the prevalent collective image of world order (including certain norms) and a set of institutions which administer the order with a certain semblance of universality.'¹³ In other words, hegemonic power is maintained on the premise of broadly-based consent, expressed in the acceptance of ideas and backed by material resources and institutions. Evidently, neo-realists and neo-Gramscians share the view that hegemony is a form of dominance. Yet, hegemony in neo-Gramscian perspective is greatly attributed to a consensual order so that 'dominance by a powerful state may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony'¹⁴ while neo-realist hegemonic stability theory places an exclusive emphasis on the preponderance in military and economic capabilities.

Also, hegemony can be looked at from the perspective of structural power. Strange (1987) usefully defines structural power to be 'the power to choose and to shape the structures of the global political economy within which other states, their political institutions, their economic enterprises, and (not least) their professional people have to operate'.¹⁵ She asserts that structural power is not in a single structure but rather in four separate but interrelated structures: security structure, production structure, credit or financial structure and the knowledge structure.¹⁶ According to Strange, all four aspects are significant in the international political economy, and the nation-state which is predominant in all such aspects of structural power is the most powerful or a hegemon in the international system. Strange (1987) shows in her argument that global hegemony is constituted by both material sphere (hard power) and non-material sphere (soft power).¹⁷

It is admitted that the discussion of hegemonic power has been broadened to embrace not only hard power but also soft power. Especially, the publication of 'The Means to Success in World Politics' in 2004 by Joseph Nye strengthens this trend in the literature on power. He reveals that 'the basic concept of power is the ability to influence others to get them to do what you want. There are three major ways to do that: one is to threaten them with sticks; the second is to pay them with carrots; the third is to attract them or co-opt them, so that they want what you want. If you can get others to be attracted, to want what you want, it costs you much less in carrots and sticks'.¹⁸ In essence, Joseph Nye views hegemony to be more than the preponderance of military capability or the largest share of the global market. The situation of hegemony, he asserts, is also dependent on soft power which refers to the ability of shaping minds, exporting values and developing ideological structures.

This overview of theories of hegemony suggests that both hard power and soft power needs to be taken into consideration when evaluating whether a nation-state is in the status of global hegemony. Moreover, it is acknowledged that none of these approaches is able to provide both a comprehensive and a coherent power analysis, either because it still ignores particular power phenomena or because it overloads the concept of hegemonic power. It should be noted that taking these approaches together is likely to help capture the nature of hegemony.

Contrasting Views on U.S. Hegemony

Strange (1987) points out that ‘the concept of hegemony is loose and ambiguous regarding both its attributes and its application. Opinions differ as to how you can recognize a hegemon, and on how hegemons use their power.’¹⁹ This explains why there exists a division in literature on U.S. hegemony: The declinist school and the primacist school.²⁰

The proponents of declinist school claim that U.S. dominance is ‘fragile’ and easily challenged by the actions of other states. They are skeptical of the unipolarity as Snyder once put it: The international system ‘appears to be unipolar, though incipiently multipolar.’²¹ In similar fashion, Layne (2006) advances arguments for the coming end of the U.S.’ unipolar moment: ‘The U.S. is not exempt from the fate of past hegemons’.²² According to Layne, the idea that the U.S. is a nonthreatening or benevolent hegemon is more myth than fact. U.S. unilateralism and its expansionist grand strategy strengthen other nation-states’ perceptions that U.S. unipolar power is threatening. The scholar adds that unipolarity has not changed the fundamental dynamics of international politics: Other nation-states *always* have compelling inducements to offset the predominant capabilities of the very powerful, even though ‘the hegemon does not pose an existential threat to them.’²³ Layne’s conclusion is that U.S. hegemony ‘may already be in the early stages of erosion’ and paradoxically, U.S. attempt to sustain its hegemonic power is likely to hasten its end by provoking more intensive efforts to balance against the U.S.²⁴

By contrast, primacist scholars²⁵ believe that the line of argument for the erosion of U.S. hegemony is baseless and assert that U.S. hegemony will be enduring. The most thorough and theoretically grounded criticisms of the primacists’ arguments are from Samuel P. Huntington and William C. Wohlforth. Huntington (1989) examines areas which have been cited by the declinist scholars as causes of the U.S. economic and thus national decline particularly deficits, declining shares and ‘systemic’ failures. He disentangles the valid from the invalid elements of these declinist arguments by showing that economic or military power are not the solely determinants of U.S. power; therefore, decline cannot be seen against a purely economic background.²⁶ Noticeably, in comparison with other large countries, American strength is especially multidimensional.²⁷ The international position of the Soviet Union, a one-dimensional superpower, depends almost entirely on its military might; the influence of Saudi Arabia in the international affairs comes from its oil reserves; Japan’s influence stems first from its manufacturing performance and then from its control of financial resources.²⁸

He points out that American power comes in various forms and international influence can flow from very different sources: population size and education, natural resources, economic development, social cohesion, political stability, military strength, ideological appeal, diplomatic alliances, technological achievement. Moreover, with an extraordinarily high rank in such main sources of national power, the U.S. is able to maintain reserves in any single arena while preserving its overall influence coming from other sources.²⁹ Thus, his conclusion is: ‘At present, no country can mount a multidimensional challenge to the U.S., and with one conceivable exception no country seems likely to be able to do so in the relevant future’.³⁰

Interestingly, ten years later, in his 1999 article entitled ‘*The Stability of a Unipolar World*’ Wohlforth echoes Huntington’s argument and underscores that the international system since the collapse of the Soviet Union is ‘unambiguously unipolar’.³¹ The findings of the qualitative and quantitative comparisons in his research shows that the U.S. is enjoying a much greater margin of superiority over the next most powerful state or, indeed, all other great powers combined than any leading nation-state in the past two centuries. Drawing on the findings that the U.S. is the first leading nation-state in modern international history with unprecedented capabilities in all the fundamental components of power: economic, military, technological, and geopolitical, he concludes that describing this exceptional quantitative and qualitative concentration of power as ‘an evanescent ‘moment’ is profoundly mistaken’.³²

The Eagle Has Not Landed

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, Christopher Lane and Kenneth Waltz predicted that unipolarity would stimulate the rise of new great powers, thus it would quickly be superseded by multipolarity.³³ Yet, in Lane’s 2006 article, the author admits that ‘obviously, these predictions were wrong.’ Broadly speaking, the declinists’ argument concerning U.S. hegemony has proved to be invalid. Therefore, this part seeks to offer more empirical analysis of U.S. unchallenged capabilities and its leadership in the security and economic frameworks that have been considered to be the foundation for the international order to support the primacist argument that the U.S. hegemony has not declined and prove that the predictions of the declinist school has not fulfilled until present. Drawing on such an insightful analysis, it is anticipated that international politics will continue to be shaped by the unipolar system in which the U.S. is still a global hegemon over the next several decades.

By all widely accepted measures U.S. capabilities has been unchallenged.³⁴ The U.S. predominates the global economy with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of approximately \$14,256 trillion in 2009 while China, normally viewed as the U.S.’ most likely future great power rival, has a GDP of about \$4,984 trillion.³⁵ The U.S. not only has a big economy but also dominates the world’s financial system. The U.S. dollar is still the principal reserve currency for the international economic system. Apparently, this is an enormous advantage for the U.S., since other nation-states ‘keep propping up the dollar for fear that a major drop in its

value would negatively affect their own investment portfolios'.³⁶ U.S. economic capability is also manifested in Washington's predominance of key international economic institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organizations.³⁷ For example, Thacker (1999) provides a detailed analysis of the U.S. impact on the international political aspects of IMF lending. He proposes the 'political proximity' hypothesis and points out that 'the more closely a country aligns with the U.S., the higher the probability it will receive a loan from the IMF'.³⁸ Though American government 'has repeatedly told foreign governments that it will not intervene in negotiations between the Fund and member governments',³⁹ American politicization of IMF lending is obvious and extensive. Bello and Kinley (1983) point out that the U.S. ignored the Fund's economic criteria and pressed the Fund to approve loans to politically friendly South Africa, El Salvador, and Haiti.⁴⁰

Significantly, American economic and technological strengths are converted into military muscle: America's military preponderance. Its powerful economy allows the U.S. to spend more than \$500 billion annually on defense. 'This is more than the rest of the world combined spends on defense, but only about 4 percent of the U.S. GDP, which means that even at this enormous absolute level of expenditure, defense spending is far less of a burden on the American economy than was the case during the Cold War'.⁴¹ Actually, the U.S. has maintained its global hegemonic power and possessed effective tools to achieve its political objectives. Washington's lead in military capability over its closest would-be rivals 'has a potent effect in dissuading them from trying to emerge as great powers and to challenge the U.S.'s dominant role in a unipolar world'.⁴² Indeed, that the U.S. was able to defy the United Nations (and major powers such as France, Germany, Russia and China) and carry out the invasion of Iraq unilaterally and that the quick collapse of the Taliban and Saddam's Iraq are strong indications that the rest of the world has been unlikely to do much to restrain the U.S.⁴³

It is worth mentioning that the process of globalisation encouraged by American governments has contributed much to the ascendance of American hegemony. The ideas of 'an interconnected world'⁴⁴ help the U.S. to export American dream abroad. Liberal and democratic values have been widely spreading. Peoples throughout the world have been attracted by American belief: 'All men are created equal',⁴⁵ and have struggled for freedom, equality and democracy. The fact shows a growing number of nation-states are prone to transform their traditional economy into a market economy, and the commitment of China and India to a market economy has not changed despite the global economic and financial crisis 2007-2008.⁴⁶

Evidently, in addition to the sheer magnitude of America's lead in economic and military power, the power of such American values and ideology make the U.S. become a 'multidimensional hegemony' - a global hegemon with sufficient hard power and soft power to shape the international politics. In their arguments the primacists demonstrate that proponents of the declinist school have missed the important factor that ultimately retains U.S. hegemony: its structural power. Therefore, 'it seems likely that America will enjoy the power to act as hegemon for some time to come'.⁴⁷

U.S. Hegemony: Lasting Forever?

That the U.S. is currently predominant in the international system and very much likely to remain so over the next several decades is undeniable. Yet, it is admitted that in spite of its current hegemonic status in the international system, the U.S. has challenges ahead to deal with. Henceforth, the question whether U.S. hegemony will be long-lasting is open-ended and attracts much scholarly attention.

In his book with a provocative title '*The Post-American World*,' Fareed Zakaria does not discuss the decline of U.S. hegemony. Instead, he holds that other nation-states can emerge without a corresponding decline in U.S. relative power. Specifically, the U.S. can preserve most of its international political dominance while China and India are rising.⁴⁸ It is because these nations will not become traditional geopolitical challenges, they are emphasising on soft power challenges to U.S. hegemony. For instance, China has employed an 'asymmetric' strategy focusing on skilful diplomacy and economic statecraft and stressed its model of political and economic development to that it is 'an attractive partner, especially in a world in which the U.S. is seen as an overbearing hegemon'.⁴⁹ Zakaria remains optimistic about the future of U.S. hegemony: The problems facing the U.S. economy: overconsumption, low savings, current account, and budget deficits, and reliance on foreign creditors can be solved and do not mean a steep decline.⁵⁰ Hence, the U.S. has the chance to 'remain the pivotal player in a richer, more dynamic, more exciting world'.⁵¹ However, he adds that the durability of U.S. hegemony is largely dependent on how it will 'embrace and adjust to the challenges confronting it'.

Similarly, Gamble (2009)⁵², Nye (2009)⁵³ and Wolf (2009)⁵⁴ argue that having preserved a predominant role in the world politics over the course of the twentieth and the first decade of twenty-first century, the U.S. is capable of adapting to maintain its leadership status. Noticeably, these scholars also argue for the changing nature of the world politics and admit there exist both the challenges and opportunities for American government. It will be overstated to proclaim that such challenges as the rising of China or India can really affect the current hegemonic power of the U.S. However, it is very hard to predict whether U.S. hegemony will be long-lasting. The far future of U.S. hegemony, to a large extent, depends upon its government's insight into the contemporary challenges and opportunities, thus it remains a topic of contention.

Conclusion

The lexical meaning of hegemony is simply 'leadership, authority and influence'.⁵⁵ Such perspectives as HST, neo-Gramscian and structural power develop more theoretically-grounded interpretations of hegemony and generally agree that hegemony refers to the power of a nation-state in an international system to lead and dictate the other nation-states of the system. U.S. hegemony is an interesting case study for such theoretical traditions. Literature on U.S. hegemonic power has been split into two main schools: The declinists

argue for the decline of U.S. relative power and the primacists hold the view that U.S. is still a global hegemon. Though the declinist scholars offer rigorous arguments for the erosion of U.S. economic and military strengths, the fact has proved that it is still too soon to argue for America's lost hegemony. Thus, the primacists' argument that the U.S. still takes the lead in all components of hegemonic power namely economics, politics, military, technology, innovation and ideas has been strongly supported by the empirical evidence. In other words, it is proved that the argument for the erosion of U.S. hegemony is too simplistic. The U.S. is still a global hegemony and will continue in that position over the next several decades. Unfortunately, there is one big thing that we cannot know to date: *Will U.S. hegemony be long-lasting?* Intense research is certainly needed to establish a well-reasoned argument for this question.

End Notes

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