

THE USA: STILL A GLOBAL HEGEMON?

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Defining hegemony

The term 'hegemony' has been employed throughout the history of international politics. Usually seen to have derived from the Greek *hegemonia*, meaning leader, the term was first used to refer to the way in which the dominant city-state in ancient Greece was able to assert its authority over the wider civilisation as a whole. In its modern usage, hegemony refers broadly to the leadership or domination of one element of a system over others. In international or global politics, a hegemon is the leading state within a collection of states. Hegemonic status is based on the possession of structural power, allied to the control of economic and military resources. Rather than just relying on the use of force, a hegemon is typically able to shape the preferences and actions of other states, and so to promote at least a degree of willing consent.

Thinking about hegemony has been crucially influenced by the work of the Italian Marxist and social theorist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who used the term to refer to the ideological leadership of the bourgeoisie over subordinate classes. Following Gramsci, hegemony is often associated not with a dominant state in international or global politics (such as the USA), but with a dominant cultural or ideological force (such as neoliberalism). However, as we shall see, hegemony as a leading state and hegemony as a form of ideology are often closely related.

The USA's rise to hegemony

Global hegemons do not emerge overnight; instead, they arise through a complex and lengthy process of power acquisition, which has an objective and a subjective dimension. The objective dimension consists of the accumulation of economic and military resources in particular, giving a state a *potential* for domination. However, the subjective dimension is no less important. To be a hegemon, a state must possess not only the ability to exercise influence or control over other states, but also a willingness to project itself on the international or global stage. The state in question must therefore make a bid for leadership, and this may entail a willing acceptance of significant responsibilities. This can be seen in the case of the USA's rise to hegemony.

Key moments in the emergence of US hegemony include the following:

- *The late nineteenth century.* The period from the 1870s to about the beginning of the twentieth century was a period of rapid economic growth in the USA, sometimes dubbed 'The Gilded Age'. Per capita income doubled over the period, and, by 1895, the USA had leapt ahead of the UK in terms of manufacturing output. Nevertheless, although the USA entered the twentieth century as the world's foremost economic power, a deep-seated commitment to isolationism, born out of an unwillingness to be drawn into Europe's rivalries and squabbles, discouraged the USA from projecting its power on the international stage.
- *1917.* Three years after winning re-election with the slogan, 'He kept us out of war', US President Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany. Arguably, the

USA's entry into World War I marked the beginning of the 'American century', especially as it was accompanied by an ambitious plan to reorder the international system, as laid out before Congress by Wilson in his 'Fourteen Points'. However, isolationism was not slow to reassert itself, as was demonstrated by the refusal of Congress to ratify the Treaty of Versailles (1919), which also meant that the USA did not join the nascent League of Nations.

- *1945.* By the conclusion of World War II, the USA had indisputably become a global hegemon. This happened in two ways. First, the construction, in 1944, of a system of economic governance, based on the Bretton Woods institutions (the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), later replaced by the World Trade Organization (WTO)), gave the USA unrivalled influence over global economic decision-making. Second, along with the Soviet Union, the USA emerged from the war as a superpower, possessing (1) a global reach, (2) economic and strategic predominance within its sphere of influence, and (3) preponderant military capacity, especially in terms of nuclear weaponry.
- *1970s and 1980s.* The USA's decision in 1971 to abandon the system of fixed exchange rates, a central feature of the IMF, effectively signalling the end of the Bretton Woods system in its original form. During the 1970s and 1980s, the institutions of global economic governance were re-ordered around the ideas of the 'Washington consensus'. Based on neoliberalism, this converted the IMF and the World Bank to policies such as fiscal retrenchment, tax cuts, financial deregulation and privatisation. By creating new opportunities for the US economy, the spread of neoliberal ideas and

policies from the 1970s onwards has often been seen as a means of sustaining, and perhaps reasserting, US global hegemony.

- *1989-91.* The collapse of communism, through the Eastern European Revolutions of 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, has often been interpreted as the culmination of the USA's rise to global hegemony. Until this point, US hegemony had been constrained by the existence not only of a rival superpower but also of a communist East that lay outside US influence. The end of the East-West divide left the USA as the world's sole superpower and created the conditions in which the US-led capitalist system could develop into a truly global economy. US hegemony was therefore reborn as unipolarity.

Key terms

Asymmetrical war. War fought between opponents with clearly unequal levels of military, economic and technological power, in which warfare strategies tend to be adapted to the needs of the weak, such as guerrilla warfare, insurgency and terrorism.

Isolationism. A policy or political strategy characterised by a low level of diplomatic participation in the international system, including an unwillingness to join alliances that may involve military commitments to other states. Isolationism, nevertheless, does not preclude the use of military power.

Neoliberalism. An updated version of classical liberalism and particularly classical political economy. The central theme of neoliberalism is market fundamentalism, the

belief that the market mechanism offers solutions to all economic and social problems.

Superpower. A power that is greater than a traditional great power, a superpower often said to possess 'great power plus great mobility of power'. The term is usually used specifically to refer to the USA and the Soviet Union during the Cold War period.

Unipolarity. An international system in which there is one pre-eminence state, or 'pole'. In a unipolar system there is but a single great power, implying an absence of constraints or potential rivals.

US hegemony in question

However, the USA's rise to hegemony was regularly accompanied by doubts about the true extent of US power. Proclamations of US decline date back at least to the late 1950s and the launch by the Soviet Union of the Sputnik satellite. During the 1970s and 1980s it became particularly fashionable to portray the USA as a declining power, facing challenges both internal and external. The internal challenges included the deepening of politico-cultural tensions due to the growth, from 1960s onwards, of the civil rights movement, an anti-establishment youth 'counter-culture' and the women's movement, to say nothing about the shock to the national psyche of the Watergate scandal of 1974, which led to resignation of President Nixon. External challenges included the USA's effective defeat in the Vietnam War, the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-81, and, most importantly, the rise of economic competitors such as Germany, Japan and the 'Asian tigers'.

The USA nevertheless proved to be remarkably resilient, both economically and politically. The Reagan administration (1981-89), for example, adopted a more assertive and explicitly anti-communist foreign policy, which involved military buildup against a Soviet Union, while some of the USA's erstwhile economic rivals, notably Japan and Germany, started to falter during the 1980s and 1990s. However, the notion of US decline has returned with renewed force in the early years of twenty-first century. Three issues have attracted particular interest:

- The redundancy of military power
- The rise of China
- A retreat from the liberal world order.

Redundant military power?

Perhaps the strongest basis for claiming that the USA remains a global hegemon is that the US military enjoys a huge lead over the rest of the world, and this shows no sign of changing any time soon. Reagan's military buildup in the 1980s was followed by the attempt by the administration of George W Bush (2001-09) to deter rivals and extend the USA's global reach by achieving a position of 'strength beyond challenge' in military terms. At present, US defence spending is almost three times as large as that of its closest competitor, China, and accounts for about one third of all military expenditure globally. The USA's lead in high-tech weaponry and air power is particularly notable. As a simple (if crude) indication of its military dominance, the USA has 10 aircraft carriers (although a further nine US ships could also be classified as aircraft carriers), while China and Russia have just one each.

Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the global military dominance that USA undoubtedly enjoys any longer provides a secure base for the hegemony. This is because there is a huge gap between the destructive capacity of the US military machine and what it can achieve politically. The USA may be the world's only military superpower, but changes in the nature of warfare mean that it is unable to wage war with a guaranteed likelihood of success. The forced withdrawals of the USA from Lebanon in 1984 and Somalia in 1993, and the difficulty of winning asymmetrical wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, demonstrate how the use of terrorist, guerrilla and insurrectionary tactics can thwart even the most advanced power. For example, air power alone cannot defeat an enemy such as so-called Islamic State, regardless of the number of aircraft carriers that may be available to support it.

China as the 'new' hegemon?

The USA is still the world's largest economy, accounting for approximately 25 per cent of nominal world GDP. It also accounts about 32 per cent of world spending on research and development, giving the USA an almost unassailable technological lead over other countries and ensuring high productivity levels. This surely provides the USA with a sound foundation for the continued hegemony? However, the economic gap between the USA and the rest of the world is fast diminishing. This is due, in particular, to China's remarkable record of sustained economic growth dating back to the 1980s, and also by the emergence of other developing states, notably India. By 2010, China had become the world's second-largest economy, and if current growth rates persist, it is forecast to replace USA as the world's largest economy some time during the 2020s. Many therefore draw attention to a historic shift that, they claim, is taking place in the world order, as the 'old' hegemon, the USA, is displaced by an ever-more ambitious China, the rising or 'new' hegemon.

However, the idea of the inexorable rise of China, and the inevitable eclipse of the USA, may prove to be a delusion. For one thing, having been accustomed to the Chinese economy growing annually by around 10 per cent, growth rates in China have fallen, in recent years, to more 'normal' levels. This has occurred as China has been forced to deal with challenges such as the need for economic restructuring to generate growth more from domestic demand than from exports, and to find ways of shifting from cheap manufacturing to more sophisticated, high-technology production. A further factor is that, to date, China's development strategy has focused ruthlessly on sustaining growth and prosperity, while seemingly being happy to allow the USA to continue to shoulder the burdens of global leadership. In this respect, history may be repeating itself. Just as the British Empire remained the global hegemony until the mid-twentieth century, despite having been overtaken economically by the USA and Germany, the USA may continue to exercise global leadership in a world in which it is no longer economic 'number one'.

Retreat from the liberal world order?

The importance of the link between US hegemony and the liberal world order is difficult to overstate. From the final phase of WWII onwards, the USA constructed a rule-based international system composed of multilateral organizations, a network of alliances and partnerships, informal meetings and norms, through which its global leadership could be exercised. Although the Bretton Woods institutions lay at the heart of the liberal world order, other key organizations included the United Nations (1945) and NATO (1949). The chief motive behind the construction of the liberal world order was the desire to avoid a repetition of the mistakes of the interwar period,

when rising nationalism and the spread of protectionism contributed to Great Depression and poisoned international relations generally.

The USA's willingness to establish and enforce the rules of the new international system derived from the fact that, being a hegemon, its interests coincided significantly with those of the system itself. The USA thus had a crucial stake in the system: by ensuring the stability of the world economy, it was attending to its own long-term interests (it did not act altruistically). However, the system's survival depended on the willingness and ability of the USA, as its central component, to shoulder a disproportionate burden of responsibility, in financial and other terms. Early examples of this included a major loan that Washington gave the UK in 1946, support for pro-Western governments in Greece and Turkey in 1947, and the implementation, in 1949, of the Marshall Plan, through which the USA provided large-scale aid to war-ravaged Europe.

Nevertheless, the USA's commitment to the liberal world order has faltered in recent years. This was evident, for example, in George W Bush's unilateralist approach to the conduct of the 'war on terror', and especially the decision to press ahead with the 1993 invasion of Iraq without authorisation from the UN. However, the most direct and thoroughgoing attempt to disengage the USA from the liberal world has stemmed from the election of President Trump, riding a tide of populist nationalism. By embracing the slogan 'America First' in his inauguration address in January 2017, Trump embraced the narrow sense of the USA's national interest that appeared to leave little scope for global leadership in its traditional sense. Although it is too early to assess the significance of the Trump presidency, the fact that the president has backed this up by bringing into question the USA's commitment to, amongst other things, NATO, NAFTA and the Paris climate accord has encouraged some to

proclaim that the 'American century' which began in 1917 with the USA's entry into WWI ended 100 years later.

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