

# American Political Power: Hegemony on its Heels?

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International relations epochs seldom have abrupt beginnings and conclusions. Rather, changes to the norms, values and boundaries of international relations often occur in a painstakingly slow and ambiguous process. As the saying goes, Rome was neither built nor destroyed in a day.

The post-Cold War period seems to be the exception that proves the rule. The reunification of Germany, the crumbling of the Iron Curtain, the demise of the Soviet Union (and with it the Cold War clash of ethics and historical interpretation) occurred with a speed unparalleled in international relations history.

Since the Cold War ended in haste it seems fitting that the key events which have come to define the post-Cold War international order have also transpired seemingly out of the blue – ushering in changes to international expectations and exchanges in broad sweeps. On the pedestal of such changes lay the materialisation of a unipolar world – with the US as the benchmark global power to which all others assess their relative position within the international hierarchy.

Before commencing on the theme of this short work, a brief exploration of terms will help advance an understanding of the general agents being depicted here. Since I am focusing on hegemony, it is best to provide a theoretical representation which will later be attached to the empirical case of the US.

In layman's terms, hegemony means that a single state dominates international society by maintaining sharp military, economic and political command over key resources, other states and institutions and a degree of control over the outcomes of international disputes and conflicts. This tri-variable definition is borrowed from Jeffery Hart's 1979 paper entitled "Three Measurements of Political Power." While Hart focussed on power at the national level, his variables are valuable for understanding international power as well.

However, this conception is not universally accepted. Hegemony has become one of the most widely disputed terms in contemporary international relations literature.

Some academics choose to employ it as an abstraction, an elusive term which acts as a conduit for portraying – not explaining, events which are unexplainable through other theories. Others use hegemony in the negative, marrying power to ill-intent. Others still employ hegemony as a regional-political device, a neutral term for a state or international institution which is more powerful than others in a specific region.

I use the term hegemony subjectively as belonging to the post-Cold War period alone. I contend that there is no continuity of hegemonic states. Contrary to hegemonic stability theory which argues that international society is always dominated by single great powers, I hold hegemony to be a relative fixture. While other periods in international relations history may boast unipolar moments, never before has there been a global hegemon with a truly global reach and a reflective globally oriented foreign policy.

Therefore, the emergence of a single *truly* dominant state in contemporary international relations is the result of power, such as high technology, which has only become available recently, making the present day international system unique in history.

That said, the US presently embodies hegemony; in this case they maintain a symbiotic relationship. In other words, America – in the post-Cold War period – is defined by hegemony and hegemony defined by America. Arguments over the particulars surrounding the emergence of the American hegemony will be further developed momentarily.

The second term requiring definition is asymmetry. Asymmetry is neither as ambiguous nor as widely disputed as hegemony. Asymmetry implies a lack of parity between two or more adversaries locked in an enduring dispute or rivalry. Such a portrayal typically focus on clandestine organisations such as cults, nationalist rebels, guerrilla movements, anarchists, organised criminal gangs and terrorist cells – those sub-state groups which maintain a revisionist ideology towards a state, states or the international system but who lack sufficient military capabilities to force change through direct combat, particularly if their adversary is a state. The hallmarks of an asymmetric war are the unconventional tactics employed by sub-state groups to compensate for their lack of military aptitude and resources.

The conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government is illustrative of an asymmetrical relationship. In this case, the Tamil Tigers choose not to face the Sri Lankan military directly but attack Sri Lanka through a blend of terrorist acts, ambushes, and hit and run tactics over a long period of time – a kind of protracted war of attrition – to psychologically erode Sri Lanka's desire to maintain the status quo of incorporating the ethnic Tamils into Sri Lankan society.

I extend this definition to include any relationship where direct military pressure cannot be applied because of the high degree of disparity of power and influence between actors – states and non-states, allies and adversaries alike.

This discussion is meant to clear away some of the fog obstructing the view of international society in the wake of the Cold War. This brief comment is meant to explore. One important issue: the advent and development of American hegemony and its exposed vulnerabilities.

## **The Making of American Hegemony**

The circumstances surrounding the dawn of America as the lone hegemon are shrouded in mystery. With little imagination as to the outcome of the nationalist and democratic agitation from Central and Eastern Europe, America awoke in 1990 to find the Iron Curtain in tatters, Germany reunited the USSR on the brink of disintegration and its own role in international relations changing minute-by-minute.

US officials had not been cautioned over the gravity of the unfolding revolutions. In fact, there is almost no indication that the US anticipated the rapid turn of events and alteration of the status quo. America had been caught by surprise, uncertain of how to react. From this confused beginning American hegemony was born, confirmed two years later in 1991 when the USSR imploded altogether.

The Cold War was defined as a duopoly – consisting of 2 superpowers. One of the superpowers vanished from the international scene leaving only one unscathed. I know that IR theorist usually make terrible mathematicians but if we can recall that in maths  $2 - 1 = 1$ , it seems natural that the post-Cold War is defined according to a unique type of unipolarity: Pax-Americana or American hegemony.

17 years later American hegemony still defines international society. This is largely due to how the US ordered its international priorities in the immediate post-Cold War years. Enforcing the principle of adherence to international law enframed in the UN Charter, institutionalisation and democratisation – became central elements of George Bush Sr.'s "New World Order." Their intent was to cultivate internationally acceptable mechanisms for peace keeping, peacemaking and the advancement of a universal human rights regime in which they would dominate. These features also formed the backbone of American foreign policy during both Clinton administrations.

Such normative consideration of American international affairs should not be misread or overstated. While reinforcing its international image through the actualisation of its foreign policy, which paralleled the democratic and capitalist revolutions sprouting up throughout Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, the US grew accustomed to the wealth of power at its disposal. It became increasingly interested in determining the contours of international society. It simultaneously advanced its own IR agenda while strengthening international institutions which were also engaged in democracy proliferation.

International resistance to American foreign policy at the time was limited to traditional quarters such as Syria, Iran, Cuba, North Korea and sometimes China and Russia. The lack of

concrete opposition to American foreign policy in the 1990's has often been explained through two key features of the international society at the time:

- 1) America was generally seen as having benign intents. It threatened neither its neighbours nor the international community at large
- 2) American national interests and the tactics employed for implementation intersected with large portions of international society – including, significantly the UN charter

A strong example of the two distinct strands of US policy pursuance in the immediate post-Cold War period is found in its military spending. One expectation of the age of arms reductions and limitations was a decline in American (among others) military spending. For many, the logic of arms race ended with the Soviet Union. The US took advantage of not having a global military competitor to embark on an ambitious programme of ABM systems while dramatically increasing its military spending to widen the gap between it and any long-term potential adversaries. In 1992 American military expenditure amounted to more than the next 7 highest spenders combined, by 2001 the next 8.

Despite its mounting military budget and the widening power gap, there was recognition that American hegemony was not unlimited. There were periods of strain and impediments from allied nations (including NATO itself), the UN, new and old adversaries such as China, Russia and Iraq. Such stresses did not hinder American hegemony and it is a matter of debate over whether they intended to.

It appears, in retrospect, that periods of strain were the result of states testing the contours of international society, contributing to it and reminding America of the new responsibilities which accompanied its preponderance of power. At no time in the 1990's was it evident that a major or even minor power sought to revise international society.

Despite such preponderance America was incapable of mitigating the many conflicts and crises throughout international society on its own. It opted in favour of forging a leadership rather than a commanding role for itself, encouraging the formation of international coalitions to support and legitimate military deployments enframed as international interests.

Although there are multi-tiered academic and popular quarrels over US policies throughout the 1990's, the 10 actual deployments of American military forces that occurred between 1991-1999 (Iraq, 1991, 1993, 1996, 1998, its involvement in Somalia in 1993, in Bosnia and Haiti in 1994, Afghanistan and the Sudan in 1998 and Yugoslavia in 1999) have generally been accepted as international goods, not simply designed to prolong American hegemony but to increase

international security – something considered an absolute gain – even though the US itself sat atop the pyramid.

As history has shown, the 1990's were honeymoon years of US hegemony; a period of international adjustment and anticipation over the future configuration of international order. The 2000 election of George Bush Jr. to President of America ushered in a new, more proactive phase of American hegemony. Bush's Neo-Con movement instigated global crosswinds among its allies, supporters and adversaries.

Even before the 11 September attacks and the unveiling of the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive war there were hints of what was coming. The Bush team, from its inauguration spoke and practised unilateralism (ie: the rejection of the Kyoto protocol and abandoning the ABM Treaty) while making clear its intentions of aggressive democratic proliferation – particularly in the Middle East, and particularly in Iraq.

These foreign policy additives were considerably influenced by Bush's administration and support staff: those who had founded or joined the Project for the New American Century in 1998 and carried its ideology with them into the halls of American power.

The PNAC bases its ideology on deploying American military force to correct what it sees as the wrongs of international society. It seeks to undermine the sanctity of national sovereignty and rather turn international society into a hybrid of the US complete with a manifest destiny and universal acknowledgement of good and evil. Although it tried desperately, the PNAC never really left the ground. It could not proactively shape international relations because within a heartbeat of the neo-con and PNAC's assumption of power America was forced onto defensive footing.

On 11 September 2001 America's hegemonic honeymoon came to an abrupt end.

## **Weakness in Power**

On 11 September 2001, agents of the shadowy al Qaeda (the Base) Islamic organisation launched pre-meditated terrorist attacks against US civilians. These attacks have since been recorded as the first shots of an asymmetric war against the US and the international society it dominates. Recounting or theorising about the historic causes of the attacks themselves will only entangle us in blame attribution and conspiracy theories. It is more appropriate to delve into some theoretical causes and more explicit impacts the attacks have had on perceptions of the US and international society.

Al Qaeda is not an omnipresent or monolithic Islamic organisation. Their reach is limited as are their resources. While al Qaeda's rare successes have been spectacular the majority of their plots are said to have been thwarted by intelligence operations or failed due to operational errors.

Yet, the existence of al Qaeda and the success it had on 11 September has significantly changed the international relations landscape by exposing the myth of US impenetrability.

In a matter of hours al Qaeda had reached out to the symbolic centre of American hegemony and exacted a price for its continuity. The rag-tag outfit had done, with box-cutters, what the USSR complete with nuclear technology could and would not fathom.

What does this mean for 21st century international relations? In the short term it is likely that the US will maintain its hegemonic position. It has, over the past 5 years reformulated its foreign and defence policies to allow for both preemptive and preventive deployments of force. Such strategies are quick-fixes, meant to prolong the dominant international position the US currently holds. However, the damage of 11 September 2001 has not yet been fully appreciated. It seems probable that the exposure of US vulnerabilities will encourage others, states and non-state actors, to pursue their own interests without paying heed – with the same awareness – to the US. The result will be a return to multipolarity and competing international interests, similar to those which preceded World War 1. We can only hope that humanity has truly learned its lessons from the violence and carnage of the 20th century and despite the inevitable exit of a dominant hegemony from international relations, does not allow the system it help construct, slip into disrepair and ultimately chaos.