Challenges to US Hegemony

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Introduction

Good morning. Salutation and all protocols observed. It is a distinct pleasure for me to be here again in Guyana and to be able to speak to this wonderful audience. It is particularly heartwarming to see here alumni of the Institute of International Relations (IIR) who have formed themselves into LIRDS. Given the subject areas you will be covering as a think tank, I feel that I should be a member of this body, since much of my research has been devoted to those very same areas – Law, International Relations, Defence and Security.

Today, I want to address the issue of hegemony. Perhaps this will provide the broad framework within which the rest of the presentations in this workshop can be placed. For after all, our region of small, vulnerable, developing states must pay attention to the possibilities of hegemonic shifts in order to know how best to position ourselves within the international system and to punch above our weight on the multilateral stage.
Since the early 1970s several scholars and observers of international relations posited the thesis that the United States of America has either lost its hegemonic position in the globe or is experiencing a decline in its dominance. The late Susan Strange used to chide US academics, in particular, for perpetuating this “myth of America’s lost hegemony”. She was particularly critical of those US academics who not only “unquestionably accepted” the proposition of American hegemonic decline but also took it upon themselves to spread that myth in such a way that it gained credence outside the US.¹

While I argue here that, despite challenges to its hegemonic status, the US continues to be a global hegemon, I am cognizant of the very real challenges to US hegemony and of the need to understand hegemony in the context of the longue durée of history. Contrary to what Francis Fukuyama would have us believe, history did not come to an end with the advent of the universalization of Western liberal democracy once the Cold War had thawed.² In fact, during the immediate post-Cold War era, although many states embrace the Western style of liberal democracy and capitalism, we did not witness a true universalization of Western liberal democracy as a “final” form of government. China and Russia may have embraced capitalism and global markets, but neither of them is ‘liberal’ or fully ‘capitalist.’ It is important therefore to question any thesis that posits the continual superiority and progressiveness of the West and the perpetual subordination and backwardness of the Rest.³ Similarly, it is
necessary and imperative to take seriously the critiques of those who question the notion that US hegemony is here to stay.\textsuperscript{4} At the same time, this chapter heeds Susan Strange’s caution not to accept blindly the view that the US has lost its hegemonic status or that US hegemony is waning.

I have divided my talk into four parts. First, the concept of hegemony is explained and a distinction drawn between hegemony and dominance. Second, a very brief history of US hegemony/dominance is provided. Third, some of the challenges to US hegemony are raised, which have been generally used by observers to indicate a waning of American power. And, finally, a brief conclusion is drawn which raises a number of questions for you to ponder pertaining to the possibility of moving towards a post-hegemonic world.

**Conceptualizing Hegemony**

Before we can begin to determine whether or not US hegemony is waning, or has been lost, it is important to understand what is meant by hegemony. The simplistic view of hegemony postulates that hegemons are preeminent powers with material and coercive ability to control the weak. Donald Puchala notes that much of the literature on world order treats hegemony as “the institutionalization of privilege, consequent inequality in the distribution of various values, and the injustices inherent in inequality.” In other words, hegemony is generally seen as “a condition in human relations to be resented, rejected, and removed.”\textsuperscript{5} Wallerstein’s take on hegemony is
slightly different from Puchala’s but attaches similar malevolent qualities to the term. Wallerstein defines hegemony as “… that situation in which the ongoing rivalry between so-called ‘great powers’ is so unbalanced that one power is truly primus inter pares; that is, one power can largely impose its rules and its wishes (at the very least by effective veto power) in the economic, political, military, diplomatic and even cultural areas).

This malevolent interpretation of hegemony should, therefore, rightly evoke “antihegemonic” action, or what Robert Cox refers to as “counter-hegemony”. But Puchala’s conception of hegemony is a bit more nuanced than those that equate it with state “dominance” and “preponderance of power”. When applied to the international relations, a hegemon, according to Puchala, “arises when a single state attains preponderant power and elects to use its power to manage the international system.” For Puchala, the power of the hegemon can be used in both malevolent and benevolent ways. Such a position is in conformity with hegemonic stability theory in that it suggests that the hegemon is a paramount leader or dominant power that has the ability to shape the norms, rules and institutions of the international system and is expected to enforce the rules it has established by rewarding compliant states while punishing the recalcitrant.

Ian Clark notes that in the international relations literature the term hegemon is central and associated with “a concentration of power.” But he also acknowledges
that hegemony is much richer than the concept of primacy. Whereas primacy focuses on “the accretion of material power”, the concept of hegemony “most readily achieves its distinctive identity when it is associated with legitimacy,” respect for the leader and voluntary or non-coercive acquiescence on the part of those being led.  

Robert Cox, building on Gramsci, drills even deeper in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the concept of “hegemony”. For him, the term refers to “a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of states and non-state entities.”  

In a world order in which a hegemon is present, the values and understanding would be relatively stable and ostensibly unquestioned. In other words, in the order created by the hegemon would be considered by most actors in the system as “the natural order”. The structure of values and understandings is always underpinned by a structure of material power in a system where the hegemon is present. That material power is what infuses the hegemon with characteristics of dominance and preponderance. But, as Cox points out, dominance is not sufficient for hegemony to be exhibited. “Hegemony derives from the ways of doing and thinking of the dominant social strata of the dominant state or states insofar as these ways of doing and thinking have acquired the acquiescence of the dominant social strata of other states.” To put it another way, it is those social practices and the ideologies that explain and legitimize them that, in fact, lay the foundation of a hegemonic order.
David Forsythe further expands on Cox’s take on hegemon by making the point that great powers do not rely on “dominance, coercion and hard power alone.” Also drawing on Gramsci, Forsythe maintains that “Great Powers get their way most effectively by securing voluntary or even unthinking cooperation from others.” Thus, a hegemon does not have to rely on costly coercion to get what it wants. It can, as Joseph Nye suggests, utilize soft power to induce cooperation. The intellectual and moral leadership, framed by the ideational terms of reference, is what separates hegemony from dominance.

**Brief History of US Hegemony/Dominance**

According to Immanuel Wallerstein, hegemonic power was exercised three times in the modern world system. The first time was by the United Provinces in the mid-17th century. The second was by Britain in the 19th century. And, the third was by the United States in the 20th century until the present.

When the US assumed the mantle of global leadership from Great Britain, it initially acted as a dominant power rather than a hegemon. During the interwar period, the US seemed to have a clear idea of the type of international order that it wanted to create. Under President Franklin Roosevelt that order was conceived as having a set of multilateral organizations, starting with a United Nations body that would replace the defunct League of Nations and an apex organ called the Security Council (which would include five permanent members with veto power who would
be responsible for guaranteeing the peace). This vision also called for a number of new economic institutions -- the Bretton Woods system, which emerged from a conference in 1944. That system would include the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD or the World Bank), and the International Trade Organisation (ITO). These organizations were expected to promote and administer an open, liberal and multilateral world economy. The US Congress nixed the idea of an International Trade Organization, but in its place was established a negotiating forum, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Immediately after World War II, the international order, as envisaged by the US, was established based on the Atlantic Charter to maintain the peace which had eluded the League of Nations. Thus was ushered in the era of Pax Americana which replaced Pax Britannica.

There is no question that after World War II the US emerged largely unscathed as arguably the most powerful nation-state the world had known. Fareed Zakaria notes that by 1945, the US’ GDP was at least ten times that of Great Britain. The US also took over several British military bases in places like Canada, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Its industrial production outstripped all other nations and it was able to devise a plan (the Marshall Plan) to rebuild the shattered economies of Germany and Japan. Furthermore, the US emerged from WWII as “the world’s foremost military power in conventional terms, but it also held a strategic monopoly
on atomic weapons” and used those weapons to devastate Hiroshima and Nagasaki.\textsuperscript{15} This was clearly a sign that the US was a dominant power, but it was not necessarily hegemonic. However, as Chandra Muzaffar reminds us, the US was also at the forefront of science and technology in the immediate post-World War II period. This gave the US a major advantage over other states with respect to the dissemination of information and the popularization of American culture.

It is in the pervasiveness of American culture that we see signs of US hegemony. Aided by the phenomenon of globalization, people around the world have gravitated voluntarily to American Pop music, Hollywood films and TV programmes, magazines, urban fashion, art and architecture, and fast foods. Some have referred to America’s pervasive cultural influence fittingly as “the McDonalization of culture.”\textsuperscript{16} But US hegemony has extended well beyond its cultural influences. US hegemony is also embodied in the countless regimes (principles, norms, rules, and decision-making processes) that operate in various corners of the globe.

**Challenges to US Hegemony**

Muzaffar has argued, quite convincingly, that US hegemony was never really global or total.\textsuperscript{17} Despite the fact that America exhibited a concentration of overwhelming military power, political power, economic power, scientific and technological power
and information and cultural power in the post-World War II period, there have been at least five major challenges to the US’ hegemonic ambition.

First, the Soviet Union posed a challenge to US hegemony almost immediately after WWII. Although both the US and the USSR were allies during the war, the ideological differences between capitalist US and communist USSR were too massive to overcome in the immediate postwar period. This period, known as the Cold War, dating from 1945 to roughly 1991, was characterized by bipolarity and a precarious balance of power. US President Harry Truman devised the Truman Doctrine in 1947 as a means of checking communist advances. Germany was divided into the German Federal Republic (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the US established a military alliance -- the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) -- to protect Western Europe from a possible Soviet security threat. Meanwhile, the Soviets countered with the creation of the Warsaw Pact in 1955 in order to protect its European satellites from a possible US threat. What resulted was a bitter ideological confrontation between the two superpowers which was played out by proxies in different parts of the globe and within the UN Security Council as well. This Cold War climate, it is argued, placed a check on US hegemony.

Second, in 1949, the US-backed Kuomintang regime in Beijing was overthrown by Mao Tse-Tung in a popular revolution. Although China was an ally of the US during WWII, it decided under Mao to embrace the communist ideology and to split
with the US. China therefore posed a challenge to US hegemony by rejecting liberal capitalism. North Korea also posed a challenge to US hegemony when it separated from South Korea as a result of the Korean War (1950-53), and embraced communism. Vietnam, which suffered huge casualties during its war with the US, also rejected liberal capitalism. Cuba, in the American backyard, chose to align itself ideologically with the Soviets rather than the Americans. These developments can be said to have countered US’ global hegemony with respect to its spread of the liberal capitalist ideology.

The third development which stymied the Americans in their quest for global and total hegemony occurred during the 1950s and 1960s was the significant growth in nationalism, which led to a large number of states from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean opting for independence from their colonial masters. Some of these states decided to align themselves with the US, but a large number of them preferred to stake out an independent path that would put them neither in the Soviet nor American ambit. Those non-aligned states attempted to use the UN General Assembly as a forum to resist Westernization and particularly Americanization. They adopted resolutions that were intended to create a New International Economic Order (NIEO) and a New International Information Order (NIIO) as a counter to the US’ liberal capitalism and the Western dominated global media. But by the early
1980s, both movements lost steam, that new envisioned order never materialized, and resistance to US hegemony was weakened.¹⁸

The fourth challenge to American hegemony comes from its own imperial overstretch. Paul Kennedy, in his book on *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, predicted that the US would go the way of previous great powers by overextending itself abroad.¹⁹ Today, the US has a network of about 737 military bases and other installations in more than 130 countries. Since the early 1990s, the US has been involved in a number of wars which have drained its resources. Examples include the 1990 war with Iraq with the declared objective of liberating Kuwait from the tentacles of Saddam Hussein; the failed invasion of Somalia; the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq after the 9-11 terrorist attacks on US soil; the failed and on-going military expedition in Afghanistan; and the so-called “global war on terror”. In each case, the financial and personnel costs have “sapped the strength of the US economy” and challenged US hegemony.²⁰ Earl Fry bluntly states that “U.S. global military commitments are unsustainable over a long period of time when placed within the context of debilitating U.S. domestic problems and growing competition from abroad.”²¹

Finally, the fifth challenge to US hegemony is the rise of competing nations and blocs. The advent of the European Union (EU) and the economic integration of countries in Europe posed a slight challenge to US hegemony. For instance, the
adoption of the Euro by almost all the members of the EU has provided competition for the US dollar. The US trade deficit with Europe has further contributed to weakening the US dollar. The rise of China as an economic power and the fact that Chinese manufacturing companies are out-producing US companies is another reason for concern. China is expected to surpass the US as the world’s largest manufacturer by 2020 and it is predicted to become the world’s largest economy in dollar-based GDP by 2041, according to Goldman Sachs. The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are also expected to out-produce the US, the UK, France, Germany, Japan and Italy combined by 2039. In Latin America, a number of states have joined together to resist the hegemonic pressure from the US. The Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA), the brainchild of the Venezuelan President Chavez, was established in 2004 to counter the hegemonic idea of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) which would have perpetuated US hegemony over Latin America and the Caribbean.

Clearly, there have been challenges to the US hegemonic position during the Cold War era and beyond. I have highlight only four prominent ones. There have been many more. But have these challenges resulted in the demise of the hegemon?

**Conclusion: Towards a Post-Hegemonic World?**
It is certainly likely, as Earl Fry predicted, that by 2040 the US will no longer be a global hegemon and the so-called “unipolar moment” will be drawn to a close. Indeed, we may be moving towards a post-hegemonic world in which there will be no single overarching dominant power.\textsuperscript{25} The era of Pax Americana that was ushered in after World War II placed the US in the unenviable position of being the world’s policeman and shouldering the brunt of the economic costs of establishing norms and regional and multilateral institutions to sustain its global hegemonic position.\textsuperscript{26} Being a global hegemon has meant that the US was pivotal to the construction of the post WWII world order. It did so at a time when British hegemony was waning and when an alternative, potentially hegemonic, actor – the USSR -- was emerging to challenge the US hegemonic position. Despite the superpower rivalry and bipolar environment of the Cold War period, the US nevertheless was able to maintain a position of dominance, if not hegemony, within the international system.

When the Cold War ended in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became clear that the US was indeed the foremost superpower in history – the most powerful nation-state to have ever existed\textsuperscript{27} -- and America experienced what some observers called a “unipolar moment”. During the immediate post-Cold War era, many historians and political scientists were forced to acknowledge that Henry Luce was right when he forecasted in \textit{Life} Magazine, published on the 17 February 1941, that the 20\textsuperscript{th} century would be known as the “American Century.” Despite the recent
challenges to its hegemonic position, posed by the rising states of China, India, Brazil, and a resurgent Russia, the US continues to maintain a hegemonic position in the globe. But as Henry Kissinger warned after the first Gulf War, American’s pre-eminence cannot last. While the US is still pre-eminent with respect to military might, it does not have the economic resources to truly dominate the globe any longer. Evidence of this fact reared its head after the first Gulf war when it was revealed that the war was financed to the tune of $37 billion by Arab states and $17 billion by Germany and Japan. As the Economist put it back then, the US “knows that it no longer has the economic clout to run a hegemony.”

A major question for observers of international politics then is whether or not the US, as a global hegemon, has created a post-hegemonic world “that can no longer be dominated by any single state or its cultural fruits.” Another important question we have to ask ourselves is: are we moving towards a multipolar system with key actors that include the US, China, Japan, India, Russia, Brazil, South Africa, and the EU? But perhaps the most important question we need to address is: will the US be content simply to be *primus inter pares* among that leading group of countries? One thing is certain, while it would be a mistake to prophesy the imminent decline of US hegemony, “it would be just as erroneous to engage in American triumphalism.”
*A version of this address was published as “US Hegemony,” in Thomas G. Weiss & Rorden Wilkinson (eds.), International Organization and Global Governance (Routledge, 2014).

2 Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (Free Press, 1992.)
6 Donald J. Puchala, Ibid., p. 572.
7 Donald J. Puchala, Ibid., p. 572.
10 Robert W. Cox, Ibid., p. 151.
16 See Zafar Bangash, “McDonaldization of culture: America’s pervasive influence globally,” Ummah Forum, found at

Chandra Muzaffer, Ibid.


