

Pax Americana: the United States as Global Hegemon or Imperialist in Disguise?

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NATHAN DOWN, DEC 9 2015

This essay argues that United States hegemony in the contemporary period does not amount to imperialism – be it deliberate, explicit or in disguise. It is doubtful that the US is capable of carrying out an expansionary and interventionist foreign policy like it could have just ten years earlier. A downward trend in both US prestige (particularly offset by China) and economic power, combined with unfolding modern geopolitical challenges, seems to be forcing the current Obama Administration to realign US foreign policy to better suit domestic priorities. Furthermore, the protracted US military occupation of Afghanistan has weakened US hegemony and undermined multilateral confidence in the US, to a certain degree, among the international community. The failures of these military incursions continue to affect the US within the diplomatic arena, particularly in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), where the rise of China and Russia is continually and deliberately contravening US agenda (as the US periodically does with China and Russia, respectively). With these contemporary challenges in mind, this essay will define key terms and set the time parameters for investigation and examine military, political, cultural and economic forces that attempt to preserve modern US hegemony to varying degrees of success. As will be argued, US power and influence are far more reactive in regard to how it maintains its position as global hegemon in the contemporary period, thus making the potential for imperial ambitions all the more unlikely.

Initially, it is useful to both define the key terms of “hegemony” and “imperialism” and clearly contextualize the parameters of the contemporary period that marks the US’ unique position of dominance in the international system. According to Richard Lebow & Robert Kelly (2001), “hegemony” is defined as legitimated leadership (p. 593). Hegemony also represents “political control” and requires a “combination of legitimacy and self-interest; rule based on sheer force ..., threat of force”, and the acquiescence of allies and subject states” (Lebow & Kelly, 2001, p. 595). This definition thus asserts that control, coercion and the acquiescence of other nation-states, be it explicit or otherwise, are central facets of US global leadership and power. Accordingly, US Hegemony is legitimized and ultimately defended by military, cultural, political and economic forms of control and influences (Walt, 2006, p.229-232). But does US hegemony necessarily take the form of US imperialism? To be an imperial power is to “exercise extensive formal control over territories and peoples beyond its own borders.” (Watts, 2011) For Paul Schroeder (2009), imperial ambition is inextricably linked with empire-building insofar as “the essence of empire lies in the possession and exercise of political control over a foreign community” (p. 63). It is persuasive that the US does exercise informal control beyond its borders. It would be near impossible for it not to do so given its preeminent position; however, political control and political control with imperial ambitions resulting in the creation of empire remain two different things. It is also important to note that although the US may have exercised imperial authority seen in the annexation of the Philippines and the Hawaiian Islands in the past, the contemporary period can arguably be distinguished from any such legacy. In order to examine the nature of contemporary US dominance, this essay locates the current debate concerning US hegemony and imperialism in the time period following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s to the present. Arguably, it was in the early 1990s when the US achieved unipolarity and unprecedented power (Lebow & Kelly, 2001, p. 605). In a sense this era of “triumphalism” and “self-delusion” continues to define current US foreign policy throughout the world (Chomsky, 2011). However, as will be argued throughout this essay, US hegemony has been occasioned by a mixture of objectives, not always of an imperialist nature.

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The end of the Cold War presented the US with a preponderant military standing that could no longer be challenged by the erstwhile security threat of the Soviet Union (Chomsky, 2011). Surprisingly, the following period did not result in the contraction of US military strength. So perhaps the absence of a clear rival to US hegemony provided an opening for the US to exploit coercive “leadership” and control through its military, particularly in resource-rich nations such as Iraq. The Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive war, seen utilized to disastrous effect in Iraq and Afghanistan, was undeniably interventionist, but it is questionable whether or not it was instigated to further US interests for imperial objectives. Arguably, the US pursued primarily ideological and self-interested security objectives within these spheres. Nor were they simply missions of US hubris and altruism aiming to bring democratization, freedom and justice to Afghans and Iraqis as espoused by both the Bush and Obama Administrations (Harris, 2008, p. 47). The protracted occupations represented an exercise of extensive formal control over Iraq and Afghanistan; however, the US did so at great human and economic cost, estimated at \$4.4 trillion and counting (Chomsky, 2011). If there were economic or strategic gains to be made in Afghanistan and Iraq then the current volatility witnessed in these countries suggests that any further opportunities have since been extinguished. It is unlikely that the US would risk international embarrassment on an economic or “ideological commitment to neoliberal market solutions” when the risks far outweighed the rewards (Harris, 2008, p. 49). The truth is far less abstract and increasingly ugly. The staged withdrawal from Afghanistan and the potential re-deployment back into Iraq (to potentially combat ISIS) suggests that the US is lost in relation to how it meets challenges to its imagined role as global hegemon. The fiasco in Iraq for the US highlights its downturn relative to the rise in Chinese and Russian global ambitions and influence in other spheres. It is unlikely that the US will be able to salvage international credibility in the region as primary objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan revolving around nation-building and an exit strategy remain improbable (Harris, 2008, p. 49).

The US military is a critical measure or indicator of American hegemony, but its relationship with allies through relationships and pacts makes the situation more complicated. The US military is not only reliant on unilateral or coalition-led force, as seen in Iraq, but also it may use multilateral force to control, coerce and acquiesce allied nations in a particular cause. Incidentally, it was a US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalition that enlisted international support for the Afghanistan incursion and subsequent occupation. According to Chomsky (2011), NATO “has become a global intervention force under US command” for the maintenance of US hegemonic power. Although numerous historical examples throughout the Cold War period and thereafter reinforce Chomsky’s claims, the NATO alliance almost fragmented in the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine. European partner nations within NATO are less willing to commit necessary resources to keep NATO viable as a multilateral organization dedicated to Europe’s defence and the broader stability of the West’s interests. Moreover, influential European members find themselves compromised by their energy dependency on Russia and by the logistics by which these resources come (Lewis & Roberts, 2014). It will be interesting to see whether European disregard for NATO will translate into the US making NATO a defunct organisation by downsizing itself from Europe’s defence into the future. The US may not see the point in continuing the NATO venture when it no longer serves its historical purpose of promoting US interests and defending its hegemony. Nevertheless, the US military is a global entity and NATO/Europe is not its sole focus currently. The US has key alliances and vested interests on the Pacific Rim. The existence of a US “Asian-centric grand strategy” – shifting US power and influence into Asia, particularly through its military – is currently resulting in the exercise of both formal and informal US control within Asian countries such as Japan and Korea (Jentleson, 2010, p. 368). Whether it be through bilateral alliances (such as US-Japan, US-South Korea) or through multilateral defense agreements (ANZUS), it is persuasive that US hegemony is seen as beneficial and stabilizing for these countries. This presence has translated into a US “empire of [military] bases” within Japan, South Korea, and even Australia (Shaplen & Laney, 2007, p. 82-97). Although the US military’s basing of its forces in foreign lands could be viewed as being akin to imperialism, and the historical legacy of US forces have been met with uneasiness, it is unlikely that these host nations will be willing to free themselves of the US military presence in the light of contemporary Chinese border disputes in their immediate vicinity. In a real sense, US military objectives, in relation to its allies, may often serve mutual rather than imperial interests.

The bilateral and multilateral recruitment of allied nations to the US is not exclusively tied to the military as an appendage of US hegemony. Moreover, the US is now looking to depart from “hard” power through military unilateralism in an attempt to “legitimize and universalize its interests” through international organizations, as it had previously done to great effect (Foot, Macfarlane & Mastanduno, 2003, p. 4). The unilateral experiment, underpinned

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by the Bush Doctrine, now seems to have given way to Obama-fashioned “soft power”: aiming at restoring global confidence in the US, whilst maintaining US “preponderance and prominence” in the United Nations (Foot *et al.*, 2003, p. 4). According to Joseph Nye (2010), “soft” power is the ability to attract rather than to coerce (p. 9). It is the cultural attractiveness of the US, more so when engaged with the UN and espousing democratization, freedom and justice as the key to peace and prosperity, which best serves its hegemonic interests (Pimentel, 2014). But has previous damage done to US cultural hegemony as consequence of unilateralism irreconcilably undermined President Obama’s present-day attempts at reinstating US ideological and strategic influence. The current trend suggests that the US’ influence, particularly within the UN, has declined when using the Security Council as a barometer of US political and cultural hegemony. The ability of China and Russia to “double veto” in the Security Council does suggest that the US’ ability to control and coerce on a multilateral platform has reduced (MacFarquhar & Shadid, 2012). During the 1990s, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the US enjoyed cultural dominance over the United Nations and the Security Council. More recently, however, Obama’s Administration is being consistently out-manoeuvred by geopolitical eventualities and the Sino-Russian bloc within the SC.

Although it may be argued that US military, cultural and political hegemony may be becoming increasingly toothless, the US still coerces and influences, to varying degrees, through the preeminent position of its economy on the world stage. No region has felt this more forcibly than Latin America. US economic meddling seen through the Washington Consensus of the late 1980s did result in a form of US imperialism (World Health Organization, *n.d.*). The neoliberal Washington Consensus, built on rethinking the relationship between government and the economy and emphasizing international macroeconomic stability, has left the current Obama administration with daunting challenges concerning its future relationship with Latin American countries (Lowenthal, 2009, p. 3-14). The WC provided the US with the ideological opportunity to exercise extensive informal control over certain South American governments and markets to meet its own ends in securing raw materials. This course of action resulted in an enduring legacy of US economic and military meddling; the installing of “puppet” governments; “exploitation ..., marginalization ..., exclusion” and an “accumulation of capital” for the US (Dello Buono, 2011, p. 155). It is unlikely that Latin American countries affected by US economic imperialism in the past will quickly forget mistreatment; however, current signs suggest the US is pursuing engagement of a Pan-American variety. President Obama needs the assistance of Latin America on a number of contentious political issues concerning human migration, narcotics/arms trafficking and trade concerning energy (Lowenthal, 2009, p. 4). Therefore, it seems as though the US imperial prerogative has been replaced by deepening dialogue, mutual understanding and trade benefits. The US is currently also more preoccupied with domestic duties rather than pursuing the expansion of its hegemony further into Latin America. Chomsky (2011) professes that “South America has been lost” and that “if the US could not control Latin America, it could not expect to achieve a successful order elsewhere in the world.” It is thus unlikely that US hegemony, in the modern Obama period, could similarly assert itself upon Latin America as it once did during the Washington Consensus, nor would it benefit to do so, as the region is becoming increasingly more powerful, assertive and economically viable in its own right. The US has thus wisely and practically abandoned its former imperialist proclivities in Latin America *in lieu* of bilateral and multilateral trade initiatives and incentives.

In balance, although US hegemony has been responsible – indirectly or otherwise – for exploitation and coercion in Latin America and elsewhere throughout the world, it has also contributed greatly to the phenomenon of globalization in the forms of mass media, information technology and online financialization (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2014, p. 393). But does globalization correspond directly with US hegemony in the contemporary period? It is undeniable that as the world’s largest economy, the US stands to benefit from the globalization and financialization of capitalism. Nevertheless, globalization has arguably tended to “level the playing field” and opened further trade opportunities for all those who can capitalize on the technological innovation (Callari, 2010, p. 213). The presence of other major actors, such as transnational corporations (TNCs) and non-government organizations (NGOs), suggests that the global market is becoming increasingly independent from state objectives (Baylis *et al.*, 2014, p. 111). Conversely, globalization has seemingly expanded beyond the control of US cultural, political and economic formal and informal authority – recent suspected foreign state-sponsored “hacking” of US Government websites highlights the challenges that globalization present regarding to state-control and privacy. For instance, the leaking of sensitive US Government documents through WikiLeaks, also through America’s own National Security Agency, suggests that the US does not ultimately act as gatekeeper over the globalization of information and communication (Stelzer, 2013). That is not to say that the US is not vying to maintain a degree of control and leadership in regard to the

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communication innovation and subsequent opportunities. In response to such challenges, the Obama administration formed the International Strategy for Cyberspace. According to President Obama, the ISC will “oppose those who would seek to disrupt networks and systems, dissuading and deterring malicious actors, and reserving the right to defend these vital national assets as necessary and appropriate” (Nakashima, 2011). It is undeniable that the US will continue to profit in most areas from the globalization process, especially relating to electronic trade opportunities and the finance sector. However, to suggest that globalization is ultimately an instrument of US hegemony – or imperialism – is implausible due to the sheer complexity and global diversity of the phenomenon. Undoubtedly, however, the US is a preeminent global player in capitalizing on the processes of globalization.

In conclusion, the hegemony of the United States in the contemporary world does not amount to actual imperialism by intention, effect or disguise. Rather, the US proves itself prepared to exercise military hegemony increasingly in concert with its allies, consistent with its ideological and security interests whilst maintaining its important role as a global economic power. It is less concerned with being a policing power in the global community, especially under Obama’s Presidency and after broader failures seen in Iraq and offset by increasing Chinese military strength and capability. Further, it has had to accept less diplomatic influence on the world stage vis-a-vis China and Russia. More recently, the US exercises its hegemony, not in an imperialist way, but rather in an adhoc manner, according to emerging objectives of a security or ideological nature in concert with its sometimes or regular partners and coalitions in various spheres. Its interests and objectives vary across the Middle East, Asia/Pacific and Europe as does its *modus operandi*. It is hard to see that the US operates with imperialist designs and methods in the modern world; rather, Obama-styled foreign policy directives suggest that the US, instead, tries to deal with the world as it finds it in vying to preserve both its preponderance of power and relative world peace through *Pax Americana*.

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