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Imperialism's Legacy in the Study of Contemporary Politics: The Case of Hegemonic Stability Theory

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In tandem with the end of imperialism, there was a belief that this strand of thinking does not have any substantial impacts on the study of contemporary world. But linking to the conceptualization of post-imperialism world now, empire's legacies in the way scholars looking the world, especially in terms of politics, are existential. Empire has been the dominant kind of international organization in the world, at least before the modern time, as it "can be traced as far back as the recorded history goes; indeed, most history is the history of empires" (Ferguson, 2005: 24). As a highly influential concept, it is undoubtedly that the notion of empire/imperialism has greatly influenced the way that theorists attempt to see the contemporary world politics. With regard to this, the author's main argument is that the legacy of empire is still existential and impactful in the study of contemporary world politics, especially in the epistemology of global stability. It will substantiate this argument by producing short introduction on the definition of empire and hegemony, then analyze the theorization of "Hegemonic Stability Theory" (HST) to elucidate the existence of imperialist mentality in the existing literature of International Relations (IR).

Definition of empire

Conventionally, the term "empire" was understood as an entity with a large geographic area under a supreme authority of the emperor/empress or other kinds of monarch or oligarch, and the territory and population of an empire is usually larger than those of a kingdom (Random, 2001: 468). However, in the contemporary world, empire should be also interpreted in a more "informal way". According to Michael Doyle (1986: 19–21), there is a stark difference between "formal empire" and "informal empire". The former "establishes its authority by territorial annexation", while the latter "exerts its power along the lines of the 'Athens model', specifically by the manipulation and corruption of local ruling classes, from which extending its control over neighboring territories and legally independent regimes" (Doyle, 1986; Zolo, 2007: 48–49). In the scope of this essay, empire will be understood as a unit exerting its supreme political authority within a vast area of territory through a variety of instruments, both formal, coercive and informal, manipulative ones.

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST)

The emergence of HST began in the Cold War era as a theory stemmed from the field of International Political Economy (IPE). It was developed by Charles P. Kindleberger in the early post-war era, focusing on the motives and behavior of the dominant state, or a hegemon. Viewing materialistically, hegemon is a state which has the greatest economic and military power, playing a role as a global stabilizer by ensuring the international political economy order (Kindleberger, 1981; Gilpin, 1981, 2016; Keohane, 1984; Strange, 1987; Webb and Krasner, 1989). In a Gramscian view, hegemon controls not only through material, coercive means but also through ideology, which Antonio Gramsci called "cultural hegemony" (Thomas, 2009). Combining those two perspectives, a state can establish its hegemony when it is able to use its material and ideological supremacy to dominate the international system and maintain the international order, in terms of politics, ideology, security and economics.

The role of a hegemon in the international system has been well explained by HST. Its main argument is, a hegemon

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will use its dominant power to structure the international economic system by creating a "international regime" (Krasner, 1983), which promotes the international economic cooperation (Krasner, 1983; Keohane, 1984), enabling it to stabilize the system, as in the absence of a hegemon, the anarchic international system "will make economic cooperation impossible, even when consistent gains from trade are possible" (Dirzauskaitė and Ilinca, 2017: 35). It can be implicitly inferred that the hegemon will also play a role as a stabilizer in other realms, most importantly security and politics. Indeed, the economic power of the hegemon enables it to make both of its "hard power" (economic, military capacities) and its "soft powers" (ideology, culture) (Nye, 1990) internationally pervasive. Then the hegemon will ensure the global stability by shaping rules and providing global security. In these respects, HST has deeper layers of implication for the global stability, and it is clearly shown that HST's conceptualization is influenced by the imperialist thinking, which will be analyzed further in the next part.

The mentality of empire in the conceptualization of HST

International Political Economy Aspect

Firstly, the impact of empire is existential in the way adherents of HST see the international political economy. As mentioned, they claim that a hegemon is necessary for the cooperation, a precondition for the stability of international political economy. This is a clear imperial ideology instilled to the development of HST. In the era of imperialism, an empire created a favorable condition for economic activities. Gilpin (1981: 112) states that "a fundamental feature of the era of empires was the static nature of wealth". At that time, agriculture was the main economic activity and its technological sophistication was still low, so the availability of territory, manpower and agricultural technologies was the main determinant for economic growth. Through territorial annexation and developing more advanced technologies, empires promoted growth by providing land, human resources and tools for agricultural activities. As agriculture was the basis of wealth and power, empires' monopoly of control over necessary resources for agricultural activities would enable them to stabilize the economy by subordinating its component nation-states under its disposition of goods and services. For example, the Tang dynasty of China established a *Pax Sinica*, with its predominance in terms of science, technology and the conquest of its nomadic neighbors (Kishore, 2008: 149), which provided the Tang empire with resources for expanding its agriculture. Then with the emergence of trade, empire had played even more important role in stabilizing the global system. An empire would be a global policeman, maintaining the peace by promoting free trade and providing infrastructure for trade activities. The period of 1792-1919 under the *Pax Britannica* was the most peaceful one in modern history (Hobson, 2000: 58), because it had actively promoted the development of the global economy by establishing the free trade and stable financial system, as well as it had promoted the illusion that economic was impersonal and divorced from power politics *per se* (Carr, 1945: 13-17). Besides, the Britain's economic success had spread the wide recognition of the liberal ideals and the benefits of free trade (Kindleberger, 1978). Additionally, in political terms, by establishing the trusteeship in its colonies, the British Empire played a role as a political stabilizer, ensuring the stability of the Britain-centric global political system. All of these successes had prevented wars among weaker states and Britain itself with other great powers.

From those analyses above, it is fair to say that the theorization of hegemonic stability has been shaped much by the intellectual legacy of imperialism. The idea of "global peacekeeper" under the imperialism era helped scholars to come up with the notion of hegemonic stability. In the previous part, it is mentioned that a hegemon would streamline the international economic cooperation by its economic superiority. With regards to this, from the HST's perspective, the hegemon plays the same role as the imperialist power. Empire provided necessary resources for agricultural and trade activities. Hegemon, in essence, has the same economic role as empire, but in the new era, the economic role of hegemon is more complexed, according to the theoretical perspective of HST. In the world with such a high level of economic interdependence, a single, dominant power is still necessary to stabilize the system, but the ways it attempts to do this are more sophisticated compared to those of empires. If empires just provide territory, manpower or tools for agriculture and trade, hegemon do more than that, according to hegemonic stability thinkers. A hegemon, as a "core" in the world economic system, by its power in economics, science and technology, exerts as much power as possible on its "peripheries" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 23; Keohane and Nye, 1989; Wallerstein, 2004), not only via its authority of resource disposition but also via establishing "principles, norms and rules and decision-making procedures" (Krasner, 1983: 185), or in the word of HST, "international regimes" (Krasner, 1983: 185-186),

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as well as via exporting technological advances. Keohane (1984) claimed that the world without a hegemony, there are no international regimes, which leads to the instability of the international economy, as the forces of economic nationalism will be risen, making it is difficult for cooperation. This argument is reflective for the influence of imperialist thinking in the way Keohane and other adherents of HST conceptualize the global stability. In the history, at least the modern one, it was illustrated that the long-term cooperation without a hegemon was sparse indeed (Gilpin, 1981: 344).

The clearest example for the chaotic situation when there was no hegemony is the period of 1919-1939, which Carr (1946) called "twenty years' crisis". After the World War I, the Britain's hegemony had been greatly declined, and the United States had been emerging as a peer-competitor for the position of hegemon with the British Empire. In that period of "twenty years' crisis", the international system was chaotic, reached the peak by the outburst of the World War II. This was attributed to the fact that the former hegemon, which is the British Empire, could not set the rules now, while the emerging one, the US, had neither the will nor the power to take this responsibility. Based on this classical case of the *Pax Britannica* and several historical cases of *pax imperium* (Ross, 2004: 76; Mentan, 2010: 153), in the modern world, hegemonic stability theorists assert that without hegemony, it is mostly impossible to have economic cooperation, causing the international system to be highly unstable. The case of US's hegemony after the World War II was studied carefully under the theoretical backbone of HST. The US had emerged as the most powerful power after 1945, and it satisfied all of the criteria to become a truly hegemon, in accordance with the HST. First of all, the US had created a "capitalist world political economy build upon multilateral principles and embodying rules that the US agreed with" (Dirzauskaite and Ilinca, 2017: 44). This had been done by the establishment of Bretton Wood system, which was a regime for commercial and financial relations between the US and other same-bloc countries; General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or World Bank. Those systems aimed to stabilize the global financial market by the "dollarization" process, which was the same as the British Empire had established a "Sterling-based" system in the *Pax Britannica* era. Next, the US had a dominant role in providing public goods. Charles Kindleberger (1981) thought that one of the most important role of a hegemon in maintaining the global stability is providing sufficient public goods. In retrospect, the Roman Empire was successful in maintaining its hegemony by building a network of road and infrastructure throughout its territory (Dalgaard *et al.*, 2018), or the Han Empire in China had built a Silk Road as a main trade route connecting the East and the West, which was central to the economic, cultural, political, and religious interactions between these regions. For the case of American hegemony, the US had utilized its economic and political power to become predominant in the realm of global public goods. Through the Marshall Plan, it had pumped billions of dollars to reconstruct the Europe's infrastructure and economy after being devastated by the World War II. The US also provided a system of international institutions mentioned above, which substantially reduced the cost of communication among member countries and created a stable platform for economic cooperation. To recapitulate, those theoretical and empirical analyses above have illustrated that the conceptualization of hegemonic stability is closely related to the perspective of imperialism.

Security Aspect

Secondly, the influence of empire's mentality on HST is also reflective in its international security implications. As emphasized, the main argument of HST has deeper layer of meaning, especially in terms of security. Although the security aspect, according to HST, is not as important as the economic one, in my opinion, it is undetachable in the study of hegemonic stability, and it is also necessary to understand the security implications of HST to see how imperialism has shaped the development of HST. Looking back at the history, the role of empires in maintaining the security, at least in their spheres of influence, was vital. For instance, the 200-years, peaceful period of the *Pax Romana*, was highly attributed to its military capacity. After defeating Mark Antony and Cleopatra in the Battle of Actium on 2 September 31 BC, Augustus became the emperor of the Roman Empire (Davis, 2001: 63-66), and he created a junta of the greatest military magnates as a coalition, eliminated the prospect of civil war. Then Augustus had established an era of peaceful in around 200 years after his death in 14 AD. With its dominant military capacity, the Roman Empire at that time safeguarded its territory from being conquered by other enemies, which maintained a favorable environment for its citizens for economic activities, or more exactly agriculture ones.

Another example is the British Empire. The *Pax Britannica*, as mentioned above, was the most peaceful period in the modern history. Until the end World War I in 1919, the United Kingdom was a global hegemon with its dominance in

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the global financial and trading system and its naval primacy. Under the British Residency of the Persian Gulf, Arab rulers agreed to authorize Britain's protection of the region by a number of treaties, most notably the anti-piracy treaty, known as the General Maritime Treaty of 1820, on all Arab rulers in the region. By signing the Perpetual Maritime Truce of 1853, Arab rulers gave up their right to wage war at sea in return for British protection (Allday, no date). The Royal Navy had spread all around the world, ensuring the security of all seas and oceans and controlling trade with most states in the world, even those were not formal British Empire, such as China, Siam (Thailand) or Argentina (Pugh, 1999: 83). Also with its supreme naval power and its economic strength, the British Empire also played a key role in maintaining the balance of power in Europe, following the Congress of Vienna (Findling and Thackeray, 2002: 57).

Apparently, linking with the security aspect of HST, there is a close linkage between it and the imperialism's thinking. A hegemon, like an imperialist, by its supreme economic and military power, promoting global security, which is a foundation for perpetual and effective economic cooperation- a core concept that adherents of HST believe to be the heart of a global stability. Back to the case of American hegemony since 1945, it is true that the US has been since a global policeman, establishing a *Pax America* as previous hegemon did their own *pax*. The US had a sophisticated and strong alliance system throughout the world as the instrument for its hegemony. Those countries signed bilateral or multilateral security treaties with the US will enjoy a protection from a global guardian with a superior military and economic capacity. In exchange, they are subordinated to the US in terms of politics and security. Besides, such a supreme capacity allowed the US to "protect the international political economy that it dominates from incursions by hostile adversaries" (Keohane, 1984: 39), meaning security monopoly enabled it to maintain the "business-as-usual" global economic activities. What the US had done above were very similar to what empires had done in the past. Basically, from the theoretical framework of the HST, the US during the Cold War can be considered as a modern empire safeguarding the whole world from security threats, most importantly those from the communism as the US and its same-bloc countries believed.

The American hegemony reached its heyday with the collapse of the Soviet Union, marked a triumphant "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer, 1990), enabling the US to legitimize itself as a global protector and punisher, acting unilaterally with any "rogue states", or in other words, free to roam (Mearsheimer, 2018). Previously, if empires had the authority to subordinate weaker states and oppress any ones challenging the status-quo, the US executed its hegemony in the same way. Invading Iraq, toppling "rogue leaders", implementing a "liberal hegemony" foreign policy as a solution to conflict (Mearsheimer, 2018; Walt, 2018) and so on, all are reflective for the US's ambition to maintain the global security landscape in its own interests. Besides, it has been pointed out that the hegemonic structure is "the most prevalent one in the history" (Gilpin, 1981: 23), and the more multipolar the world is, the more likely conflicts will be among states (Waltz, 2010). With the single dominant power, the global security will be maintained with no "hegemonic war" happens (Allison, 2017). Indeed, despite being challenged by many emerging powers, most notably China, the American hegemony now is still far from being toppled, and its role as a global stabilizer is still out of question, under the theoretical viewpoint of HST. Its far-flung system of military alliances, its predominant role in international economic and financial institutions as well as its economic, military and technological primacy are evident for the American centrality in maintaining the global stability.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, legacies of empire are intellectually impactful to scholars of contemporary politics. Indeed, "scholars of IR have detected a propensity for every single international system to evolve in the direction of a universal empire" (Gilpin, 1981: 29). Through those thorough analyses and empirical, historical cases above, the essay has attempted to prove that HST, as one of most influential schools of thought in IR, has been greatly shaped by the framework of imperialist thinking. A hegemon maintains the stability of international system, not only in economics but also in security terms, which is the same as empires did throughout the history. In the era of intensive great powers' competition now, the epistemology of global stability is undoubtedly being prioritized in the IR literature. Hegemon, being one of the core concepts in the study of global stability, will be gaining its predominance. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the conceptualization of global stability has been reflective for the existential legacies of imperialism on the contemporary politics, in terms of epistemology.

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