

# AMERICAN HEGEMONY AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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## AMERICAN HEGEMONY AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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In the most general sense, hegemony describes the leadership of one state over others in an international system. Hegemony, as a particular type of international order, is distinguished from a non-hegemonic order in which there are manifestly rival powers and no one power is able to establish the legitimacy of its dominance. But is the exercise of hegemony through strength a sufficient condition of hegemony or is something else required? And are rules to be understood as commands or types of social norms? Since the U.S. is considered to be the world hegemon, answers to those questions are very important for the direction and means of U.S. foreign policy.

To answer these questions, one has to draw a distinction between social and non-social conceptions of power. The latter is based on a quantitative measurement of a country's military, economic and technological capabilities in relation to those of other countries. On the other hand, a social view of power focuses on the voluntary acceptance of the hegemon's rules and values by a significant number of states in the international system, including some important great powers.

In turn, a social conception of power necessitates a distinction between 'authoritative power', on the one hand, and 'coercive power' on the other. Authoritative power rests not on force but on legitimacy, defined here as the normative belief on the part of an actor that a command or rule ought to be obeyed. Consent based on a normative belief about the rightness of a directive or norm is thus the foundation of authoritative power. Coercive power, on the other hand, is associated with a country's material strength and/or exercise of force.

Unlike authoritative power, force does not induce compliance. The exercise of force is instead an admission that compliance cannot be induced by non-coercive means. When a state resorts to force to direct the behavior of others, it is apparent that it has lost or has relinquished an important aspect of power: the ability to attract voluntary compliance. The use of force to extract compliance must thus be seen as a diminished or impoverished form of power, one that contrasts with more deeply socialized forms of power that achieve the endorsement of other actors.

The use of coercion is often considered the mark of a strong state or well-disciplined international order. However, this is highly questionable for a number of reasons. First, relying on the use or threat of force leads to vulnerable and unstable rule that depends on the vagaries of command, threat and sanction. Second, coercive power is a costly source of rule. There are the simple yet substantial costs associated with the continued articulation of threats, monitoring of compliance

threat of force leads to vulnerable and unstable rule that depends on the vagaries of compliance, threat and sanction. Second, coercive power is a costly source of rule. There are the simple yet substantial costs associated with the continued articulation of threats, monitoring of compliance and application of force, but there are also the hidden costs of foregoing the benefits of voluntary cooperation and assistance.

Furthermore, because coercive power leads to unstable rule, it is difficult to predict and anticipate risks, and the costs associated with this tend to discourage corporations from investing in dictatorships. Third, coercive power is best suited to the realization of short-, not long-term interests. Finally, as all of the above indicate, coercive power might well deliver domination (rule by control), but not governance (rule by authority).

Authoritative power rests on commonly held beliefs about the legitimacy of governing agents, institutions and rules, and, while these beliefs require construction, communication and redefinition, their taken-for-granted quality, the fact that they often become naturalized, fosters stable rule. Authoritative power is less costly than coercive power. This is not to say that the cultivation of legitimacy is costless, but only that it is boosted by the voluntarism of willing compliance and less encumbered by the costs of maintaining a comprehensive regime of threats and sanctions.

Authoritative power is better suited to the realization of long-term interests than the use of force. As Neo-liberals have demonstrated, it is rational for a hegemon to socialize its power through participating in multilateral institutions if it seeks long- over short-term gains. Finally, by definition, the cultivation, institutionalization and exercise of authoritative power foster governance, not domination.

According to the authoritative view of power, a hegemonic structure of international order is one in which power takes a primarily consensual form. A social view of power, therefore, informs a conception of hegemony, in which hegemony is understood as a norm-defined, socially sanctioned status.

Neo-conservatives in the George W. Bush Administration are not interested in the U.S. being merely first among many great powers. Their goal is comprehensive hegemony, in which America's military might is so great as to make balancing pointless, and in which its universal values inform the wholesale reform of the global political and economic order.

The social conception of power elaborated in the previous paragraphs leads to a view of hegemony significantly different from the neo-conservative and neo-liberal ones; a view that resists the temptations of self-ordained legitimacy and cultural chauvinism.

Instead of seeing hegemony as a dominant state's brute capacity to 'lay down the rules', this view sees the role of the hegemon as something that is widely recognized and accepted rather than simply claimed; as power that is held among states, not over them; as a norm-defined, socially sanctioned status, and stresses the importance of legitimacy and consent in highlighting a leading state's power and influence. In other words, to become hegemonic, a state would have to found and protect an international order which is universal in conception. Not an order in which one state directly exploits others, but an international order in which most of the states (or at least those within reach of the hegemony) could find compatible with their interests.

But what do all these mean for U.S. hegemony? Three points are crucial here. First, although the U.S. as a hegemonic power must have substantial material power resources, its hegemony is ultimately a reflection or form of social hierarchy, based on its status and recognition. Second, hegemony is an institutional type of international order, one in which generally recognized

ultimately a reflection or form of social hierarchy, based on its status and recognition. Second, hegemony is an institutional type of international order, one in which generally recognized procedural and substantive norms cement social hierarchy, diminishing the need for coercion and exploitation on the part of the U.S. that would destroy its authoritative power. Third, hegemony is founded on the negotiation of identities and interests.

For secondary states to find an international order compatible with their interests, U.S. leadership, as well as the procedural and substantive norms that frame such leadership, must bear the mark of those interests. Finally, the U.S. may use displays of force to impress its dominance, but force must be used sparingly and judiciously if it is not to undermine the social status and institutional bases of hegemony itself. If force is used in ways that are deemed illegitimate by the community of states, a gap emerges between the social identity of the dominant power and prevailing international norms, a gap that is ultimately corrosive of hegemony.

Hegemony is characterized by a central paradox. Hegemonic powers have the material capabilities to act unilaterally, yet they cannot remain hegemons if they do so at the expense of the system that they are trying to lead. The consent that other states grant a hegemon depends on its observance of the institutional rules and practices of the hegemonic international order, and serious violations of those rules have the potential to erode that consent and, in turn, hegemony itself. The U.S. thus has a strong incentive to avoid socially corrosive unilateral actions although domestic politics can drive the hegemonic state the other way. The hegemon possesses the capabilities and will to act unilaterally in pursuing its own interests. This raises expectations among domestic political actors and state officials that the government will pursue its own course when its interests are at stake.

To sustain the consent of other states, and as an extension, international order and stability, the U.S. must resist the pull of domestic politics and do two things. First, it must maintain the basic procedural norms of the system, which means recognizing the legal equality of all states, observing the rules like others, permitting their responsibilities to delimit their freedom and accommodating secondary powers. Second, the U.S. must recognize that new procedural and substantive norms must be negotiated, not dictated. This is partly because norms are not commands; they are socially sanctioned standards of behavior. But it is also because other states require recognition as social agents with identities and interests worthy of respect.