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Expert Comment

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The debate on American hegemony

Brian C. Schmidt

Ian Clark is correct when he writes that “the present state of the ‘hegemony debate’ is, to say the least, confusing” (Clark, 2009, p.24). The aim of this paper is to provide some conceptual and theoretical clarity on the diverse means by which the field of International Relations (IR) understands the concept of hegemony. A secondary aim is to consider what these different theoretical accounts of hegemony have to say about the debate on American hegemony. After reviewing several different definitions of hegemony, I find that the concept embodies two main ideas.

The first is the notion that hegemony entails overwhelming or preponderant material power. The second is the idea that hegemony involves the exercise of some form of leadership. The two notions are in turn, carried over into the discussion of how hegemony is conceptualised by different schools of thought in International Relations theory. The first section of the paper examines how different theoretical approaches in the field comprehend the concept of hegemony. In the second section, I consider what the different theoretical accounts of hegemony offer towards a better understanding of the current debate about US hegemony.

Realists generally define hegemony in terms of first, overwhelming power, and second, the ability to use this power to dominate others. The predominant tendency among realists, however, is to equate hegemony with overwhelming material power. Realists typically identify the most powerful state in the international system as the hegemon; a state that possesses vastly superior military and economic capabilities. Power, according to this view, is synonymous with ‘capabilities’, and the capabilities of a state represent nothing more

than the sum total of several loosely identified national attributes. These may include size of population and territory, economic capacity, and military strength.

Closely connected to the idea that hegemony entails the concentration of material capabilities in one state is the related idea that this preponderant state is able to dominate all of the subordinate states. John Mearsheimer, for example, defines a hegemon as a “state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system”. He adds, “no other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it” (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.40). This is similar to the view put forth by Robert Gilpin, who considers hegemony to be a particular structure that has periodically characterised the international system. For Gilpin, a hegemonic structure exists when “a single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system” (Gilpin, 1981, p.29).

Within the realist literature on hegemony, there is a tendency to conflate hegemony with unipolarity. By definition, unipolar systems are those with only one predominant state. Those who equate hegemony with unipolarity accentuate the overwhelming material power dimension of the hegemon and ignore, or discount, the wilful exercise of leadership. According to this formula, hegemony and unipolarity are essentially synonymous with preponderant material power.

The realist variant of hegemonic stability theory attempts to marry the dual components of preponderant power and the exercise of leadership. The starting point of hegemonic stability theory is the presence of a single dominant state. In addition to preponderant power, hegemonic stability theory argues that one of the roles of the hegemon is to ensure international order by creating international institutions and norms that facilitate international cooperation. Hegemonic stability theory is basically a realist prescription of how to achieve international stability in an anarchical international system. As Gilpin explains, “according to the theory of hegemonic stability as set forth initially by Charles Kindleberger,

an open and liberal world economy requires the existence of a hegemonic or dominant power” (Gilpin, 1987, p.72).

Liberal theories of hegemony emphasise the type of leadership that is exercised by the hegemon. Liberal theories do not completely discount the importance of preponderant material power but argue that this alone is insufficient for understanding the concept of hegemony. Liberal theorists are interested in the mechanisms and processes through which hegemony is exercised. Liberal hegemony, according to John Ikenberry, “refers to rule and regime-based order created by a leading state.” He continues, “like empire, it is a form of hierarchical order—but in contrast, it is infused with liberal characteristics” (Ikenberry, 2011, p.70). Ikenberry argues that liberal hegemonic order is based on consensus and is characterised by a high degree of constitutionalism:

“that is, state power is embedded in a system of rules and institutions that restrain and circumscribe its exercise. States enter international order out of enlightened self-interest, engaging in self-restraint and binding themselves to agreed-upon rules and institutions. In this way, order is based on consent” (Ikenberry, 2011, p.61).

In essence, a grand bargain is made between the hegemonic state and the secondary states to create a liberal hegemonic order. The latter willingly agree to participate within the order and the dominant state agrees to place limits on the exercise of its power. For Ikenberry, the maintenance and legitimacy of a liberal international order are contingent upon the hegemon abiding by the rules and institutions that it helped to establish. By exercising leadership in this manner, hegemony is established less by domination and more by consent.

Constructivists, Neo-Gramscians, and the English School all embrace the view that hegemony is about more than just raw material power and domination. For Robert Cox, one of the leading Neo-Gramscians, “dominance by a powerful state may be a necessary but

not a sufficient condition of hegemony.” According to Cox, the concept of hegemony “is based on a coherent conjunction or fit between a configuration of material power, the prevalent collective image of world order (including certain norms) and a set of institutions which administer the order with a certain semblance of universality” (Cox, 1981, p. 139).

Cox combines material power, ideas, and institutions into a comprehensive theory of hegemony. Drawing directly from the work of Antonio Gramsci, Cox argues that hegemony incorporates two elements: force and consent. By conceptualising hegemony as a fit between material power, ideas, and institutions, it is difficult to privilege one set of factors over another. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that international institutions and the process of institutionalisation are key components of the neo-Gramscian conception of hegemony. While international institutions embody the material interests of the hegemon, they also, according to Cox, perform an ideological function in that they help to legitimate the norms of world order.

By emphasising the role of ideas, and recognising that the social world is composed of both material and ideational forces, social constructivist conceptions of hegemony are not dissimilar to those put forward by Cox and neo-Gramscians. Constructivists, however, are more inclined to emphasise the ideational aspects of hegemony over the material. While most constructivists support Cox’s adoption of Gramsci, one of the critiques of Cox is that, in the end, he did not sufficiently privilege the ideational component of hegemony.

According to Ted Hopf, Cox’s account is still too materialistic in the sense that ideas continue to be a manifestation of the dominant power’s political-economic interests. Yet for Hopf, the importance of Gramsci’s conception of hegemony is that it helps us understand why the masses go along with and accept a given order (Hopf, 2013, pp. 317-354). Thus, it is not just the ideology of elites that matter, but also how dominant ideas percolate downward and become accepted as taken for granted by the broader public. This is what Gramsci meant by ‘common sense’. The degree to which there is a discursive fit between the ideas

propounded by the elites and the common sense of the masses is a key indicator of the exercise of hegemony.

The English School approach to international relations emphasises yet another aspect of hegemony: social recognition. According to this view, hegemony is not equivalent to predominant material power. Neither is it solely an attribute of the dominant state itself. Rather it is, as Ian Clark puts it, “a status bestowed by others, and rests on recognition by them.” Clark defines hegemony as “an institutionalised practice of special rights and responsibilities conferred on a state with the resources to lead” (Clark, 2009, p. 24).

Building on the work of Hedley Bull and others, Clark proposes that we consider hegemony as an institution of international society. Reasoning by analogy, Clark finds that the institution of hegemony functions in a manner similar to that of the great powers. Just as special roles, functions, responsibilities, and status are bestowed on the great powers, Clark reasons that the same is also true of hegemons. This is one of the reasons he argues that social recognition is a key component of hegemony. The institution of the great powers was not reducible to a set of material assets, but instead rested on a shared normative framework in which others bestowed status and recognition on those who performed a managerial function in international society.

US hegemony

Given the diversity that exists among how the different theories comprehend the concept of hegemony, it is not surprising that there have been endless debates about the character and durability of US hegemony. From the perspective of contemporary American foreign policy, two questions about US hegemony have become fundamental today: one, does the maintenance of hegemony continue to serve American interests; and two, is American hegemony in decline? The answers to these two questions are actually interrelated.

If one believes that hegemony is beneficial for the United States, as proponents of both primacy and liberalism assert, then every effort should be made to maintain it. Conversely, if one does not believe that hegemony serves American interests, which is the position of balance-of-power realists and offensive realists, then instead of pursuing policies to maintain it, the United States should begin adjusting to the reality of inevitable hegemonic decline and the rise of peer-competitors such as China.

One of the advantages of the realist conception of hegemony is its focus on the material basis of hegemony: military and economic strength. Yet even while agreeing that material capabilities are the cornerstone of hegemony, there are a number of contending views on the relative power position of the United States today. A key point of contention in the debate about the durability of American hegemony is the degree to which the United States continues to have unrivalled capabilities.

In Layne's terminology, "unipolar optimists believe that American hegemony will last for a very long time and that it is beneficial for the United States and for the international system as a whole" (Layne, 2007, p. 134). The best representatives of this view are William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks. Wohlforth and Brookes dispute the popular view that China's rise represents a challenge to US hegemony, insisting that the United States continues to have preponderant material capabilities that are vastly greater than any other state (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008).

According to Brooks and Wohlforth, American hegemony is beneficial to both the United States and the world primarily because it greatly reduces security competition by rendering the balance of power inoperable and continues to confer significant benefits to the United States. For Brooks and Wohlforth, it is of vital importance that the United States continues to pursue a grand strategy of primacy or "deep engagement" in order to prevent the return of balance-of-power politics, which they argue is not possible in a unipolar system (Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, 2013, pp. 7-51).

In contrast, 'unipolar pessimists' believe that the United States' relative power position is declining and view the grand strategy of primacy to be antithetical to American interests. Most structural realists believe that global hegemony is either impossible to achieve or fleeting. Not only is it difficult to dominate the entire globe, but structural realists strongly believe in the prevalence of balance-of-power politics.

Contrary to unipolar optimists, structural realists do not believe that balancing has failed to take place since the dawn of the unipolar moment. Indeed, it is for the very reason that active balancing is taking place especially on the part of China and Russia, that many structural realists argue that the United States needs to abandon the grand strategy of primacy or deep engagement and adopt a grand strategy of restraint or offshore balancing (Posen, 2002, pp. 36-42).

Liberal conceptions of hegemony have much to offer on the debate about US hegemony. Instead of simply emphasising material capabilities, proponents of liberal hegemony accentuate the leadership and institutionalised components of hegemony. However, like unipolar optimists, those adhering to liberal versions of hegemonic stability theory argue that American hegemony is beneficial to both the United States and the world and should be maintained.

The argument is that the United States is better able to pursue a liberal grand strategy – democracy promotion, free trade, interdependence, and multilateral institutionalism – when it has unrivalled capabilities (Ikenberry, 2000). With respect to whether the United States can maintain its unipolar position indefinitely, liberals are, in Layne's terminology, unipolar agnostics. The question about the durability of American hegemony is not just about trends in the relative distribution of power but about the character of American leadership.

According to liberal conceptions of hegemonic stability theory, US power is not used to dominate others, but rather to provide the leadership that is necessary for an open, liberal international order to exist. This is the crux of Ikenberry's story of how the United States

after World War Two built and maintained a liberal hegemonic order that has produced peace and prosperity for the world. According to Ikenberry, the United States did not use its preponderant power after World War Two to dominate the world and create an empire. Instead, American hegemonic leadership was wisely used to strike a grand bargain and establish the foundations of a liberal international order.

With the rise of new powers, the growth of right-wing populism, the turn to authoritarianism, and the election of Donald Trump, the durability of the liberal international order is being called into question. Yet most liberals remain confident that the liberal international order will endure. Their basic argument is that the rules and institutions the United States helped build under *Pax Americana* will persist, making it difficult for revisionist states to fundamentally change the liberal international order.

The English School and Social Constructivism move the discussion of American hegemony and unipolarity away from raw material capabilities to the dynamics of legitimacy. Instead of engaging in the endless debate about China's rise and the future of US power they emphasise the role of legitimacy in maintaining any given hegemonic order. Only time will tell if future US presidents will be able to reclaim a legitimate liberal order or if China is able to provide the legitimacy necessary either to take over leadership of the liberal international order or offer an alternative vision (Schweller and Pu, 2011, pp.41-72).

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