

The Remaking of a Unipolar World

Common sense and most academic thinking argue that a hegemon's prime objective should seek to maintain the prevailing international system, but that is not the world in which we live today. Measured in any conceivable way, the United States has a greater share of world power than any other country in history. Whether it is referred to as the world leader by those who approve of its policies or an empire by those who oppose them, it is a hegemon in today's unipolar world order. The irony is that Washington seeks to change the rules of that order. Why?

Positioned at the top of the hierarchy, the hegemon should want to maintain and solidify it. Even though it may have to pay a disproportionate share of the costs, including heavy UN dues and a high defense budget, such burdens are difficult to shirk and represent a small price to pay for the international order that provides the hegemon with so many benefits. Other states may appear to get a better deal by prospering within the international system without having to pay the high price; western Europe, for example, can free ride on U.S. efforts in many spheres while still complaining about U.S. dominance. Yet, enormous U.S. power brings unprecedented benefits, ranging from the key role of the U.S. dollar in world finance to the centrality of the English language throughout the world to Washington's ability to block most political initiatives that would bring it harm.

The current international system, although not necessarily perfect, is certainly satisfactory, partly because the United States has played such a large role in establishing it. No state can have a greater stake in the prevailing order than the hegemon, nor can any state have greater power to maintain the system. The United States should then be a very conservative state in its

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foreign relations; with its power and dominance thus assured, it should be the quintessential status quo power. It makes a puzzle of Washington's current behavior, which is anything but conservative. In the fierce debate over the merits of its post-September 11 foreign policy, insufficient attention has been paid to the odd fact that the United States, with all its power and stake in the system, is behaving more like a revolutionary state than one committed to preserving the arrangements that seem to have suited it well.

The Post-Cold War Conservative Impulse

U.S. policy from the end of the Cold War to the September 11 attacks, defined by some as dull and characterized by frequent if small military interventions, sought to bolster the international system. This conservative stance was endorsed by perhaps the most famous statement of the George H. W. Bush administration: the 1992 draft Defense Guidance, written under the direction of Paul Wolfowitz for then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney. Because either bipolarity or multipolarity would recapitulate the history of world politics and threaten U.S. interests by producing great conflict if not major wars, the draft argued that the United States should ensure that no peer competitor would arise. Accordingly, Washington had to maintain a military force so modern and potent that no one could consider challenging it. It also had to handle a range of problems that were important to other states so that they would not need to develop their own robust military capabilities. The thrust of the argument was that the United States should do what was necessary to maintain the trajectory of world politics, and although the bellicose tone of the document had to be modified once it was leaked to the press, it stands as the standard conservative position.

Under President Bill Clinton, some critics argued that the United States was confusing foreign policy with missionary work while others decried its passivity in the face of world poverty, genocide in Rwanda, and growing autocracy in Russia, yet neither critique gained great traction. For most people, there were no pressing reasons for more dramatic action. Many international politics experts agreed, especially those of a realist stripe, and argued that the United States should follow a policy of selective engagement and maintain a role as an offshore balancer.

The first President Bush and Clinton had the same basic idea: support the status quo and intervene only to prevent or reverse destabilizing shocks such as Iraq's invasion of Kuwait or Serbia's brutalities in Europe's backyard. Such interventions could be short lived, and few other problems were severe enough to merit this kind of attention. In fact, most changes in world poli-

tics could be tolerated because they were not great enough to threaten the fundamentals of the unipolar system. Thus, when the United States did intervene, it was playing an essentially conservative role.

A New Beginning: Hegemonic Revisionism

Although the 1992 Defense Guidance was drafted by neoconservatives and is often seen as foreshadowing current U.S. policy, the contrast between the two is actually quite severe. Three linked elements that have become central to contemporary U.S. foreign policy had little place in the draft document almost a decade earlier. First, current doctrine emphasizes that peace and cooperation can exist only when all important states are democratic. Because a country's foreign policy reflects the nature of its domestic regime, states that rule by law and express the interests of their people will conduct benign foreign policies, and tyrannies will inflict misery abroad as well as at home.

The irony is that Washington seeks to change the rules of today's unipolar world order.

Second, a vital instrument to preserve world order is what the administration calls preemption but is actually prevention, including preventive war. In extreme cases such as Iraq, the United States has justified the use of force by arguing that even though Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, he would have developed them when conditions were propitious. It was better for the United States to act rather than wait for this to occur. This may be a political and psychological rationalization, but the argument does have a strong logic to it, especially if deterrence cannot cope with dedicated adversaries, most notably terrorists. When defense is also inadequate, the United States must use preventive measures.

Preventive actions, however, even if effective in the short run, will only be a stopgap if international politics were to proceed on its normal trajectory. To bring lasting peace, stability, and prosperity, the system must not simply be preserved, as the Defense Guidance advocated; it must be transformed.

Although the second element in this trilogy can perhaps be squared with a conservative view of the role of the hegemon, the other two cannot. Together, the three argue that even if the status quo is in some sense satisfactory, it is an illusion to believe that it can be maintained. One way or another, world politics will change drastically. The questions are who will change it and whether it will be for better or worse. In a way that

should shock Henry Kissinger and other students of the order established by the Congress of Vienna, U.S. foreign policy should be more closely modeled after Napoleon than after Talleyrand and Metternich. The United States simply cannot maintain its hegemonic position through the policies advocated by realists and followed before September 11, 2001, so current doctrine argues that the United States must instead be a revolutionary power.

The Limited Explanatory Power of September 11

The most simple and obvious explanation for this strategic shift is the September 11 attacks. Few analysts have dissented from the administration's claim that radical measures are required to confront the threat of terrorism, even if they disagree with many of its policies. For George W. Bush, the change has been even more drastic as the September 11 attacks greatly heightened his sense of threat and strengthened his belief that there is a tight link between tyrants and terrorists. Although Bush and his colleagues may have cynically exaggerated the ties between Saddam and Al Qaeda, they do appear to believe that only nondemocratic regimes, if not all nondemocratic regimes, will sponsor terrorism and that without state backing, terrorism will disappear. Combined with the belief that terrorism constitutes a fundamental threat to the rest of the world, this leads to the conclusion that the world can only be safe if all countries are transformed into democracies. Although cynics may see these beliefs as mere rationalizations for policies arrived at on other grounds, they are likely sincerely held and are partly responsible for the revolutionary U.S. policy.

This is not to say that the beliefs are well founded. As Gregory Gause has written, the connection between tyrants and terrorists is tenuous at best.¹ The Palestinian semistate is democratic, but will it abandon its use of terrorism? The extent of Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism in Kashmir and India has not ebbed and flowed with the extent to which Pakistan has been democratic. Iran sponsors some terrorism and yet is much more democratic than Saudi Arabia, which does not. Aside from killing their vocal opponents who have gone into exile, most nondemocracies shun terrorism, especially because terrorists are difficult to control.

The more fundamental claim that terrorism is such a threat that it requires transformation of the international system must also be questioned. Unless they use nuclear weapons or deadly contagious diseases, terrorists cannot inflict great damage.² As terrible as the September 11 attacks were, fewer people were killed on that day than die in automobile accidents in one month. Acquiring nuclear weapons and even infectious bio-

logical agents, which of course could kill the terrorists' friends as well as their enemies, is extraordinary difficult. Although significant prophylactic efforts are necessary, there is a great disproportion between the threat and the remedies that Washington proposes. The threat looms large to the United States in part because, unlike the countries of western Europe, it had not experienced a successful terrorist attack of this scale in the past, and the visual image of the twin towers burning and collapsing has been etched vividly and indelibly on the American psyche. Terrorism also seems so threatening because U.S. hegemony and the dramatic decline in international war that may be a product of it mean that many of the threats that had been so prominent previously have now disappeared. There is little else to compare it to today. Psychologically if not logically, small threats appear to be in the same class with fundamental challenges such as the Cold War.

The fact that the U.S. is a hegemon empowers it to pursue its revolutionary impulse.

Herein lies the paradox. On one hand, many scholars deny that the terrorist threat requires the United States to transform the world. On the other hand, it is not only Bush and a neoconservative cabal who believe that it does but also a significant segment of elite opinion, including some who opposed the war in Iraq as a counterproductive digression. The September 11 attacks are part of the explanation for why many U.S. citizens feel that a heterogeneous world is unsafe, but this conclusion does not follow ineluctably from these events. Something more deeply rooted is involved.

The Hegemon's Security Dilemma

The United States believes itself caught in a version of the familiar security dilemma. To make itself secure, it must impinge on the security of nondemocracies. Despite the intrinsic value it places on democracy, it might be willing to live in a mixed world if it were a safe one. Yet, such safety could not be guaranteed because nondemocracies will always threaten the United States. Although the current world system is unipolar, the situation resembles that of the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were mutually threatening and threatened because their contrasting ideologies and domestic regimes made each an inherent menace to the other. Ironically, the fact that the United States is a hegemon feeds its revolutionary impulse. Hope as well as fear, opportunity as well as threat are at work.

THE POWER TO CHANGE

The fact that the United States lacks a peer competitor means that it can turn its focus elsewhere. Furthermore, with the disintegration of the USSR, Bush's 2002 national security doctrine is correct to assert that "[t]he great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise."³ Because almost all countries pay lip service to democratic values, U.S. leaders

Hegemony also magnifies the sense of threat.

can readily believe that now is the best time for the United States to remake the system in its own image.

The key is to lead other states and societies to become liberal democracies and respect individual rights, the law, and their neighbors. All instruments are to be deployed to this end: military power, covert action, nongovernmental organizations, and diplomacy, which is to

be reorganized to support a "transformational" program.⁴ Although Bush recently has avoided calling for the overthrow of regimes in North Korea and Iran, the logic of his policy clearly points in that direction. Even the most effective antiproliferation policies leave room for cheating. The only way to ensure that the mullahs of Iran or the dictator of North Korea do not acquire nuclear weapons is to remove them from power.

One can disagree with the theory that democracies are benign or note Bush's hypocrisy, as well as that of previous U.S. presidents, because they have attacked democratic governments that follow unacceptable policies, such as Hugo Chavez's Venezuela or the Palestinian government under Hamas. More importantly in this context, one can argue that the U.S. stance is mere rhetoric, as it was in the past. Yet, all signs indicate that Bush and many of his colleagues believe in what they say, and even critics have been surprised (some horrified and others heartened) by the unprecedented extent to which Washington has pressed friendly and probably unstable regimes such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia to democratize, even if it has not used the most extreme instruments at its disposal.

Bush's stance is both pessimistic in its assertion that standard tools of international politics are insufficient to tame tyrannical regimes and optimistic in its argument that democracies will be well behaved internationally and will accept U.S. leadership. Optimism is also prominent in his belief that, with U.S. assistance, democracy can be brought to all other countries. According to the Bush administration, this form of government will thrive when the artificially imposed barriers to it from old autocratic regimes are

removed. Democracy does not require demanding preconditions and the prior transformation of society.

REMAKING THE SYSTEM IN THE HEGEMON'S IMAGE

The other side of this coin is that as long as many countries are undemocratic, democracies elsewhere, including the United States, cannot be secure. President Woodrow Wilson wanted to make the world safe for democracy. Bush extends and reverses this, arguing that only in a world of democracies can the United States be safe. The ringing cry in his second inaugural address that “[t]he survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands; the best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world”⁵ echoed then-Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s statement in 1950 that “[w]e are children of freedom. We cannot be safe except in an environment of freedom.”⁶ Throughout the Cold War, the United States vacillated between accepting a heterogeneous world and believing that the USSR would be a threat as long as it was Communist. President Ronald Reagan took Acheson’s position to heart, although perhaps only when it appeared that the Soviet system might indeed be brought down without triggering a war.

The U.S. position in the world is without precedent, but the basic impulses animating it are not. Having established order within its large sphere, a hegemon will find itself threatened by whatever is beyond its reach. The very extent of the hegemon’s influence means that all sorts of geographic and ideological disturbances can threaten it. Frontiers can be expanded, but doing so just recreates them. Despite the fact that or perhaps because it lacked what would now be referred to as peer competitors, the Roman empire was never able to establish stable frontiers, and although the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century was able to develop tolerable working relationships with European states, its empire expanded beyond the original intention in part because of the inability to control and limit its holdings in Africa and Asia. Having established trading outposts, it was driven to further expansion not only by competition with other European states, but by the difficulties of establishing local order.⁷ For the United States, the frontier is ideological rather than geographic, but the basic point is the same: preservation of a desirable and ordered zone requires taming or subduing areas and ideologies of potential disturbance.

Hegemony thus also ironically magnifies the sense of threat. The very fact that the United States has interests throughout the world leads to the fear that undesired changes in one area could undermine its interests elsewhere. Most changes will harm the United States if they do not improve its situation. Furthermore, U.S. hegemony means that even those who share its

Part of the explanation lies in Bush's personality and religious conviction.

values and interests have incentives to free ride on its efforts, knowing that Washington cannot shirk its role. Thus, although the United States has few intrinsic interests in the borderlands around China and Japan is strong enough to carry much of the weight in this region, U.S. fears about the rise

of China follow a certain logic. Unless China becomes a benign democracy, increases in its regional influence will diminish that of the United States. Although China cannot become a peer competitor in the foreseeable future, even those who are not paranoid believe that China will intrude on the U.S. order because the latter extends to China's doorstep. Disturbances that would be dismissed in a multipolar or bipolar world loom much larger for the hegemon because it is

present in all corners of the globe and everything seems interconnected. It is a truism of realism that increases in national power bring increases in interests. It is not only with aggressors that the appetite grows with the eating.

HEGEMONIC POWER AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

The U.S. rejection of international law in general and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in particular demonstrates why its stance is not and cannot be conservative. At first glance, one would think the United States would seek to strengthen many legal restraints.⁸ Because it is developed by the most powerful actors, international law limits the changes that are likely to accompany shifting power relations, greatly reduces the costs the hegemon has to pay for inducing others to comply, and is thus generally conservative. Yet, whereas a legal system applies the same rules to all actors, a hegemonic system is quite differentiated, with the hegemon having a role distinct from that of other states.

Seen in this light, the Bush administration's claim that other states cannot adopt the doctrine of preventive war and its rejection of the ICC make a great deal of sense. Only the hegemon can nip problems, including others' problems, in the bud, and the very fact that it acts preventively means that others need not and must not do so. Hegemony similarly requires the use of military force in a way that exposes the hegemon to ICC action. It will be the hegemon's forces that are engaged in the most difficult activities, and its status makes it the obvious target for those with multiple motives ranging from jealousy to domestic policy to regional aspirations that can be furthered by embarrassing it. Given the difficulties of the task it has taken on, it is unlikely that the hegemon can live by any set of rules that cannot encompass all the

unforeseen circumstances in which it may have to act. If the United States is to transform the system, it cannot adopt the egalitarian and collegial model so favored by standard liberal theories of international cooperation.

American Missionary Zeal and Its President

Besides the systemic factors leading today's hegemon to change rather than preserve the system, other elements besides September 11 are also at work: Bush's personal religious outlook and personality and U.S. political culture.

BUSH'S RELIGIOUS CONVICTION

Coming into office, and indeed as late as September 10, 2001, the president did not have deeply rooted views about foreign policy. Those that he did have had inclined him toward a traditional if assertive realist policy, as summarized by the 1992 draft Defense Guidance. Yet, after the September 11 attacks, he adopted the new stance with extraordinary speed and within days became committed to preventive action and spreading democracy around the world. Part of the explanation for this shift lies in his personality, especially his attraction to certainty and grand gestures and, to an even greater extent, the religious conviction that permeates his way of thinking.⁹

Growing out of the way in which turning to Christ enabled him to break with his aimless and alcoholic past, Bush is prone to look for missions that give his life and his country meaning, to see the world in terms of good and evil, and to believe in the possibility and efficacy of transformations. When early in his administration he said that he was "tired of swatting flies"¹⁰ as a counterterrorism policy, Bush was indicating his predilection toward more sweeping solutions, brushing aside the question of whether these might prove excessively costly and even counterproductive. This way of thinking was reinforced by the terrorist attacks, which led Bush to feel that he had now found his mission. He sees himself and his country as involved in a struggle against evil. An associate of the president reports that, after the September 11 attacks, Bush thought "[t]his is what I was put on this earth for."¹¹ As a born-again Christian, he is strongly attracted to the idea of transforming people, societies, and world politics. Bush's predisposition here converges with strands of neoconservative thinking that see the need for the United States to undertake ambitious foreign policy missions to maintain its domestic political and moral health, as well as the related belief in the possibility of international progress through converting people to correct ideas and ideals.¹² Incrementalism and accepting the ways things are cannot save souls or bring lasting peace.

THE AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

People who lack Bush's personal history and beliefs may reach similar conclusions. Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to name only the two most obvious cases, helped shape the Bush doctrine, although their personalities are very different from his. Yet, as Americans, they are influenced by the strands of the U.S. tradition that feed a transformationalist approach. As Harvard political theorist Louis Hartz brilliantly argued 50 years ago, as a society founded by a middle-class

Strands of the U.S. tradition feed a transformationalist approach.

fragment, the United States has had great difficulties understanding societies that are not liberal, has misunderstood revolutionary impulses, and has expected its own model to be readily replicated.¹³ Often incorrectly reviled as conservative if not apologetic, this perspective remains powerful and penetrating. Under current circumstances, it helps explain the combination of fear and optimism that characterizes the United States, but few of its allies.

Therefore, a heterogeneous world is a dangerous one, values that Americans hold dear are instinctively shared by others even if they do not know it, and once the heavy hand of oppression is lifted, other countries will become liberal democracies.

Throughout the Cold War, U.S. leaders stressed that the United States was a revolutionary power.¹⁴ This was partly a rhetorical device to counter the impression that the Soviet Union stood for progressive change while the United States stood in its way, but the message was not entirely fictional. The United States had never been happy with a world of nondemocratic states. It has always had deep reservations about traditional power politics and is much more prone than the Europeans to believe that a country's foreign policy is strongly influenced by its domestic arrangements. Both critics and defenders of U.S. foreign policy often noted its distinctively reformist characteristics.

A second and related tradition is Wilsonianism. Wilson thought that the United States could spread democracy abroad and that these regimes would be inherently peace loving and cooperative. Although these views were not uniquely American—Wilson was in part influenced by the writings of British liberal reformers—they have deep resonance within the U.S. polity. It was one reason why Reagan did not feel inhibited to label the Soviet Union an evil empire and confidently push for ending the Communist system.

Even when it was not seeking such grand a goal, the United States was prone to react to setbacks and obstacles during the Cold War not through

midcourse corrections, but rather by seeking bold initiatives, such as unifying Europe, modernizing the Third World, or overruling British and French resistance and pushing for German unity in 1989–1990.¹⁵ Some of these moves succeeded and others failed, but they were not the sort of system-maintaining prudent policies that one expects from a status quo state. Rather than deal with specific difficulties on their own terms, ameliorating them or designing around them, the United States sought far-reaching changes.

The Implications of a Revisionist Hegemon

For better or for worse, then, a variety of systemic, national, and individual reasons explain why the United States is a revisionist hegemon seeking a new and better international system rather than a status quo power continuing the order in which it now wields significant power and exercises great influence. Bush and his colleagues fervently believe that transformation can succeed. In February 2002, the president responded to a question about the predictable French criticisms of his policy by saying that “history has given us a unique opportunity to defend freedom. And we’re going to seize the moment and do it.”¹⁶ A month later he declared, “We understand history has called us into action, and we are not going to miss that opportunity to make the world more peaceful and more free.”¹⁷ This is an opportunity because not only does the United States have great power, but spreading democracy is in everyone’s interest, except the few remaining dictators, and people all over the world want to be free.

A transformationalist impulse will continue beyond Bush.

This is a marvelous story, but each of its aspects is flawed. U.S. power, although great, is far from unlimited. Indeed, the very fact of its great power means that even those sympathetic to it will worry with good reason that their interests may be neglected. Foot dragging if not active resistance is to be expected, and not only by France. This is particularly troublesome because widespread and active support from a very broad coalition could help spread democracy by showing that it is not merely a cover for U.S. power. More importantly, although Bush is undoubtedly correct that few people want to be ruled by dictators, establishing a working democracy is difficult. Most would agree with Bush that, over the long run, democracy would prevail, but there is very little in historical experience or social science theory to lead one to expect these transformations to be quick or easy.

Furthermore, if the required effort is to be sustained over a prolonged period, commitment is required in the United States, across society and the political system. Yet, this seems unlikely. Everyone wants to see democracies established abroad, but if the effort runs into trouble, involves high costs, and produces instability and anti-American regimes, it is not likely to be domestically sustainable. The U.S. political system was not constructed to support an active foreign policy, much as Bush wishes that it were.

Although the Bush experiment is not likely to succeed, some of the transformationalist impulse will continue because of its deep roots in the United States' worldview as well as its hegemony. How to balance what is desirable with the constraints of an intractable world will be the challenge for Bush's successors.

Notes

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