

Hegemony, Institutionalism and US Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice in Comparative Historical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical and policy implications of contemporary American hegemony. A key argument of the paper is that the development of American hegemony generally, and the distinctive turn in American foreign policy that has occurred in the wake of September 11 in particular, can best be understood by placing recent events in a comparative and historical framework. The immediate post-World War II order laid the foundation of a highly *institutionalised* multilateral system that provided key benefits for a number of countries whilst simultaneously constraining and enhancing American power. An historical reading of American hegemony suggests that its recent unilateralism is undermining the foundations of its power and influence.

Introduction

It is commonplace to describe the position of the United States in the contemporary international system as 'hegemonic', but does hegemony remain a useful concept in political science in the 21st century? When even *The Economist* routinely uses the term, it is clearly no longer an expression solely associated with scholarship, but one that seems to capture something fundamental about the nature of the early 21st century international order. And yet the current 'hegemony of hegemony' conceals as much as it reveals: the analytical purchase that the notion of hegemony once had is in danger of being dissipated through indiscriminate overuse, in much the same way that 'globalisation' also become an over-used and under-specified cliché and hence not always a useful concept. Confusion and imprecision emanates from the fact that hegemony is not static and US hegemony has evolved overtime since the Second World War. It is thus the first aim of this essay to demonstrate that the development of American hegemony generally, and the distinctive turn in American foreign policy that has occurred in the wake of September 11 in particular, can best be understood by placing the more recent events in a comparative and historical framework.

Consequently, this paper is organised in the following manner. First, we briefly revisit some of the more influential theories of hegemony. We ask if the concept of hegemony needs to retain its original critical edge—and concomitant emphasis on the discursive-cum-ideological creation of social reality be found in international relations scholarship influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci—in order to offer useful analytical purchase. For some, this is clearly the case.¹ Yet, notwithstanding the use of the term in US international relations as either a scholarly discipline (quintessentially in the work of Keohane, 1984) or perhaps more appropriately as in the study of US foreign policy, this radical hue is generally absent. But from a policy perspective, the rejection of the utility of the concept in much US scholarship—even with its less critical applications in ‘hegemonic stability theory’—we shall argue, may help in part explain the recent failure to foresee some of the negative impacts of recent American policy in both the security and economic spheres. Indeed, some of the most telling critical scholarly insights into recent American foreign policy have emerged from outside the United States (see for example, Buzan, 2004, Cox 2003, Hassner and Vaisse, 2003).

The second part of the paper considers the creation, and early operation, of the international order that emerged in the aftermath of World War II. In it we highlight the very different circumstances that prevailed when U.S. hegemony enjoyed more widespread support and international legitimacy—in the eyes of its allies, at least—and the US was consequently able to sustain and benefit from its hegemonic position. Crucially, the immediate post-war order laid the foundation of a highly *institutionalised* multilateral system that provided key benefits for a number of countries whilst simultaneously constraining and enhancing American power. Indeed, we see a commitment to institutionalism by the US—that is the building and underwriting the post world war two institutions—rather than multilateralism, as the more appropriate way to characterise US policy in that era. By so doing, the now clichéd distinction between a golden age of multilateralism and the new dark age of unilateralism, that pervades much populist critical literature of US policy, loses analytical, if not rhetorical, purchase; hence the title of this paper, ‘Hegemony, Institutionalism and US foreign Policy’.

While the current order, considered in the final section of the paper and characterised by unilateralism, is different to the earlier era, it is not as different as a close reading of the history of post World War Two US foreign policy reveals. There are, as we shall demonstrate, also key strands of continuity between the two eras. Specifically, the key distinction is not between multilateralism and unilateralism rather it is between unilateralism and institutionalism. To make such an assertion is not, however, to suggest that the recent *manner* in which the US has tried to use its unparalleled power to secure compliance with an agenda that primarily reflects its priorities and interests—especially by its linkage of economic and strategic issues—is not unprecedented in the post-World War II period.

Moreover, as we argue by way of conclusion, it is not impossible that the privileging of unilateralism over institutionalism may ultimately weaken the basis of the US hegemonic position. As events in Iraq demonstrate, and as the rise of anti-Americanism around the world suggests more generally, there are limits to American power. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, the historical record suggests that the U.S. is most powerful and able to pursue its narrowly conceived national interests when it is most engaged with, and responsive to, the institutional architecture of the international system of which it is such an integral part (Nye 2002; Beeson and Berger 2003). One of the more important conclusions to emerge from the historically grounded comparative analysis that follows, therefore, is about the nature of hegemony itself. Absent the constraining influence of a rival power with the desire and the apparent capacity to challenge American hegemony, and given the frequently uncritical support of key allies like Britain and Australia, hegemony may generate what, in the domain of international finance, economists call, a situation of ‘moral hazard’. Moral hazard sees investors fund risky or unwise enterprises secure in the knowledge that should things go wrong it will be some other actor (host government or local investors) not they, that will carry the cost. In the foreign policy version of moral hazard the hegemon is encouraged to undertake risky foreign policy initiatives in which, as with unsuccessful financial speculation, the principal speculator does not carry the major costs of failure and which, we shall argue by way of conclusion, may also undermine the longer-term primacy of the hegemonic power.

1. Recasting hegemony

Before considering the ways the idea of hegemony has been used to describe the most dominant power of any era, it is worth saying something about our preference for this term, rather than the increasingly fashionable idea of 'empire' (Hardt and Negri 2000; Bacevich 2002; Cox 2003). At the most general level there is still much merit in Adam Watson's (1992: 15-16) distinction between empire as the 'direct administration of different communities from an imperial centre', and hegemony as the ability of some power or authority in a system to 'lay down the law' about external relations between states in the international system, while leaving them domestically independent. Although, there is clearly a debate to be had about the precise mechanisms through which such a broad distinction may be realised, and about the amount of independence that such a system might actually confer on various smaller powers, this sort of differentiation still has merit. Even if the recent attempt by the administration of George W. Bush to articulate and justify a 'doctrine of pre-emption' (US Government, 2002) and its concomitant attempt to occupy and control Iraq is seen as an imperial impulse, it may prove to be an historical anomaly and one that may ultimately make similar future adventures less, rather than more likely. Indeed, the long-term consequence of the Iraq conflict may be a reversion to former patterns of less direct *hegemonic* control.

The concept of hegemony has been employed in a number of different ways, but is always about the pre-eminent position of one power in and over the international system. Charles Kindleberger, who did more than anyone else to popularise the concept in the USA, is generally associated with a neo-realist position that culminated in the hegemonic stability theory so influential for much of the 1970s and 1980s. Central to Kindleberger's (1973) analysis was the idea that the hegemonic power of the era could - indeed *should*, in America's case - play a stabilising role in the international system (especially in the field of international finance) by providing collective goods and preventing the sort of economic cataclysm that occurred between the two world wars. Such assumptions about the necessity and potentially benign impact of hegemony provided the background for the elaboration of 'hegemonic stability theory', which claimed that 'hegemonic structures of power, dominated by a

single country are most conducive to the development of strong international regimes whose rules are relatively precise and well obeyed' (Keohane 1980: 132).

The prominent position of hegemonic stability theory was largely undermined by the apparent decline of American power - something that led to a new concern about international stability 'after hegemony' (Keohane 1984) - and by the U.S.'s willingness to utilise its power in pursuit of primarily national goals rather than collective goods. As is understood, expectations about American decline can be seriously premature (see, for example, Kennedy, 1987). Moreover, if the theoretical claims of hegemonic stability theory ever were valid they ought to be vindicated now, when American power is widely considered unipolar (Mastanduno 1997, Ikenberry, 2002 and 2003). In such circumstances, hegemonic unipolarity might be expected to provide the potentially critical prerequisite for stability in a world of anarchy and relative gains (see Hobson 2000). Recent events, we will argue, have done little to confirm this expectation.

The U.S.'s attempts to act unilaterally where key policymakers judge this to be in American interests suggest that while the current hegemon may enjoy historically unparalleled material advantages, the precise purposes to which such power may be put depends not on the unchanging structure of the international system, but on a complex interaction between domestic forces and shifting, contingent geo-political conditions. Crucial factors here, of course, are the foreign policymaking elites of particular eras. Some of the key figures in the post-war and post-9/11 periods will be considered in greater detail later, but it is worth emphasising at the outset that American foreign policy has always been characterised by a number of distinct, competing policy traditions that have powerfully shaped external relations. Walter Mead (2001) identifies four distinct traditions of American foreign policy – Hamiltonians, Wilsonians, Jeffersonians and Jacksonians.

Elements of all these traditions can be detected in both periods under review here, with a clear distinction emerging between a Wilsonian-inspired concern about America's moral obligation to create an international, rule-governed community prevailing after World War II, and the more Jacksonian preoccupation (albeit accompanied by Wilsonian rhetorical flourish) with domestic security, economic

development and indeed, a kind of reactionary Jacksonian nationalism (with its emphasis on closed communities defined by race, ethnicity and religion) taking precedence under the current Bush administration. Following a recent study by Anatole Lieven (2004a and b) we can now see that nationalism, not the usual lens through which to observe US foreign policy, is in fact a much stronger and little understood factor underwriting its behaviour in the contemporary era. So powerful is it that it actually competes with, indeed seems to over rule, the Wilsonian liberal reading of hegemony in US foreign policy. As Leiven noted:

‘One way of looking at American nationalism, and America’s troubled relationship with the contemporary world is to understand that many Americans are in revolt against the world which America has made. ... American nationalism is beginning to conflict with any enlightened or even rational version of American imperialism; that is to say, with the interests of the US as world hegemon.’ (Leiven, 2004a: 30)

The point we are making here is that the roots of contemporary American foreign policy are national. Indeed, policy has always been mediated by American domestic interests and priorities, rather than simply reflecting the logic of the international system itself. In other words, as Ruggie famously observed about the U.S.’s emerging dominance, ‘it was the fact of an *American* hegemony that was decisive after World War II, not merely *American hegemony* (Ruggie 1993: 593 [emphasis in original]).

While it is important to acknowledge that scholars working in a traditional realist framework have some important insights to offer, especially given the current Bush administration’s desire and willingness to employ its material assets in pursuit of unilaterally defined goals, this sort of analysis cannot capture the complexity of either the domestic influences on foreign policy, or the wider international environment within which it unfolds. The focus on material power highlighted by Mearsheimer, for example, undervalues the importance of America’s ideational dominance—or ‘soft power’, that is emphasised by liberals like Nye (2002)—consequently leading him to conclude that ‘there has never been a global hegemon, and there is not likely to be one anytime soon’ (Mearsheimer 2001: 41). While there are plainly limits to even the U.S.’s capacity to impose itself militarily, a preoccupation with material or strategic

assets on the one hand or even soft power on the other, misses an important part of American dominance that flows from its *institutionalised* position at the centre of an increasingly ubiquitous, not to say ‘global’, liberal economic order (Ikenberry 2001; Latham 1997) reflecting what Mead (2004) has recently described as ‘sticky power. As we shall see, and despite the argument of critics who claim the post-war order that the U.S. effectively created was designed primarily to further the interests of American capital (Kolko, J&G 1972), the post-war order was widely accepted as functionally necessary and ideologically legitimate.

Capturing this interplay of ideational, institutional and material forces that has effectively constituted American hegemony over the last fifty years or so is a plainly a complex task, but the influential model that draws its theoretical inspiration from Antonio Gramsci offers at least part of a potential answer. This approach is by now widely enough known to need little recapitulation here (see Germain and Kenny 1998), but it is worth briefly highlighting some of its key features and potential advantages. One of the most useful aspects of the schema set out—now more than two decades ago by Robert Cox (1981)—was the attempt to link ideas, material capabilities and institutions, the interaction of which provides the basic structure of a given international order.

This formulation produced a dynamic model of the international system, capable of capturing the evolving nature of hegemony, rather than the more static, state-centric conception, found in (neo) realist scholarship. The key advantage of this approach was that it helped to explain both the basis of American hegemony, its changing nature, and by implication, possible sources of decline. For as Cox (1987: 150) pointed out, one of the most important sources of ideational domination in the liberal market order American hegemony helped create and legitimise, was the separation of economics and politics; the rule-governed economic international order achieved an apparent independence that effectively insulated and entrenched the U.S.’s overall position as the lynchpin of the system created in the early phase of American hegemony.

This separation of economics and politics is complex, multifaceted and important to our story. It gradually developed throughout the 20th century at both the level of

scholarship (see Caporaso and Levine, 1992) and the level of policy practice, with the oft-made distinction between the ‘high politics’ of security and ‘low politics’ of trade. The scholarly development of economics, as a problem solving ‘science’ in the wake of the marginalist revolution on the one hand and the less theoretically robust, but nevertheless policy useful scholarship of international relations, offering us the linked notions of ‘anarchy’ and the balance of power on the other, suited the interest of the US national policy community wishing to maintain a distinction between high and low politics in the 20th century. This situation largely prevailed until the end of the Cold War.

But, what the marginalist revolution in economics had rent asunder at the end of the 19th century, globalisation, at least in terms of policy, has brought together at the end of the 20th (for a discussion see Higgott, 1999 and 2002). It is in the context of globalisation—defined here simply as a process of enhanced global economic integration via the progressive liberalisation of trade, deregulation of finance and privatisation of assets and hollowing out of state activities—that this distinction in both a scholarly and a policy sense is undermined. It is in this context that the unilateral application of American power and the re-securitisation of U.S. economic foreign policy is to be understood. To see why American hegemony may ultimately be undermined by its own recent actions, it is useful to contrast post 9/11 policies with the immediate post-war period, when a particular confluence of geo-political circumstances entrenched American dominance at the centre of the emerging international order.

2. Present at the Creation: The Consolidation of American Power

The parallels between the international system in the respective aftermaths of World War II and September 11 are striking indeed. The U.S. again finds itself engaged in a major reconstruction project involving massive sums of, mainly American, money in a fashion that is routinely compared to the Marshall Plan that began in 1947 (Dalton 2003). Similarly, the current Bush administration has described itself as being in a ‘war on terror’ that is eerily reminiscent of the struggle with communism that defined the earlier era. Yet while there are noteworthy parallels between the two periods, there are also important differences – differences which suggest that, despite the

overwhelmingly dominant position of the U.S. in both periods, specific foreign policy initiatives, when combined with the dynamic interaction of material and institutional forces more generally, can produce distinctive outcomes that structurally-based readings of American power alone cannot easily account for.

While World War II may have enhanced and revealed the extent of its primacy, the sheer fact of American dominance did not dictate policy. One of the most important influences on the thinking and actions of the policymakers who shaped the immediate post-war order—and something which is notably absent from the present generation—was a ‘preoccupation with the past’ (Gaddis 1972: 31). This is hardly surprising. Not only had the world emerged from the most destructive conflict ever seen, but the war itself had been preceded by an unprecedented economic crisis that had thrown millions out of work and into poverty, fuelled the rise of fascism, and raised major questions about the future of capitalism itself. Against such a backdrop, a desire to learn from history and avoid the mistakes of the past was understandable.

What is more surprising is the precise form the American-led response to these earlier traumas took. Significantly, and again in distinction to the present situation, broadly conceived economic initiatives were largely separate from strategic concerns. This distinction should not be drawn too sharply because the successful economic reconstruction of Europe was plainly capable of serving a more encompassing geopolitical goal in the rapidly escalating struggle with communism.² But not only is it possible to discern quite distinct influences and rationales for the strategic and economic components of America’s emerging post-war policy, there are also important *internal* influences on policy which meant that the very conception of national security was shaped by domestic forces and experiences (Smith 1994). It is possible to read unprecedented initiatives like the Marshall Plan as flowing directly out of America’s own experiments in economic stimulation under the New Deal (Hogan 1987). Indeed, it is important to remember that the New Deal itself was ‘the first wholly secular reform movement in American history’ (McDougall 1997: 149), and emblematic of the extensive internal transformation that the long twentieth century was working on the U.S. itself. Significantly, America’s post-war planners ‘sought to project these principles onto the world as a macrocosm of the New Deal regulatory state (Burley 1993: 125). In other words, without a major internal

reorientation of American attitudes about the possible role of government and appropriate responses to wider geopolitical events, a very different form of hegemony might have developed.

As it was, the defining influence on post-war policy was, of course, the Cold War and the rapidly evolving, Manichean struggle with the Soviet Union. Here the parallels with current 'war on terror' are irresistible, especially given the sense of moral certitude that has pervaded both periods of American policy-making. And yet George Kennan's (1997 [1947]) highly influential analysis of Soviet behaviour dealt with a potentially formidable opponent with a similarly global reach; contemporary events by contrast—less than a year past the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and despite some of the inflated rhetoric—are well understood to be of plainly of a different order of magnitude. Not only were American planners in the post-war period constrained by a credible rival, they were also inhibited by what – until recently, at least – had been a pronounced sense of *anti-imperialism* (Gaddis 1997: 38; Smith 1994: 143), and a notable caution about 'open-ended' foreign entanglements.

Realists might claim that American responses to the emerging bi-polar order were a product of the structure of that order itself and the U.S.'s pivotal role within it, but the precise nature of American policy is still somewhat surprising. Certainly, the Truman doctrine's uncompromising commitment to support 'free people' may have reflected Kennan's hard-headed, realist analysis of the Soviet threat, but there was also a recognition of the need for widespread aid to support European reconstruction 'for the more urgent purpose of alleviating social and economic conditions which might breed communism' (Gaddis 1972: 317). Belatedly, a recognition of the complex causes of security threats is now becoming part of the 'war on terror', but it is important to recognise that, in the aftermath of World War II, American policy was part of a more broadly-based effort to create an inter-locking, multilateral institutional structure with which to facilitate not just European re-construction, but also the international integration of economic and political activity more generally. True, America may have been the prime mover in the emerging order and arguably its principal beneficiary, but as Ikenberry (2001) notes, it was an order that not only offered pay-offs for allies, but one that provided potentially important, institutionalised constraints on the U.S. and the unilateral application of its power.

The story of the development of the key institutions that emerged in the post-war period has been told elsewhere and is well-enough known to need little recapitulation here.³ One point, however, is worth emphasising. The scope of US ambition for the institutional architecture, that it did so much to create, should not be underestimated. In fact our preferred way of describing US policy during the Cold War era is as primarily ‘institutionalist’ rather than ‘multilateralist’. While it took the lead in building *multilateral* institutions, including alliance structures such as NATO as well as the Bretton Woods economic institutions, the injunction to behave multilaterally always applied more to the junior partners in these organisations than the hegemon itself. Indeed, a hallmark of US hegemony in this period was the development of institutions binding on others, but in which the hegemon was effectively only ever ‘self-binding’ (Martin, 2003). Thus the Bretton Woods system reflected what Ikenberry (2003) called an institutional bargain. This bargain, underwritten by a combination of US power and resources, enlightened self-interest and liberal values, albeit it leavened by a dose of technocratic Keynesianism (Ikenberry, 1993) allowed the creation of a set of collective goods providing institutions acceptable to both the US and its Cold War allies.

As we will suggest, this bargain has come undone since the end of the Cold War as American administrations have progressively sought to free themselves from these institutionalised constraints and, in the process seemingly weakened the foundations of the post-war international order that American power helped create, and which largely reflected American goals and interests. Indeed, the persuasive arguments of the likes of Ikenberry notwithstanding, even an apparently selfless and multilaterally-based initiative like the Marshall Plan was always tightly controlled by the US, furthered American grand strategy, and was essentially ‘unilateralism in the clothing of multilateralism’ (Kunz 1997: 33).⁴ The implication of this experience, and one that seems to have largely escaped the current generation of policymakers in the U.S., is that hegemonic power can be effectively—perhaps more effectively—exercised through multilateral auspices.

The impact of American policy in the post-war period is that it had differential impacts that reflected the complex interplay of the contingent, the institutional and the

ideational. As Maier (1981) pointed out, America's successful intervention in post-war Europe was made possible by a fundamental transformation in domestic class attitudes across much of the continent: European social structures were consequently more accommodating of American intrusion and receptive to the perceived necessity of national reconstruction. In addition, the fact that Americans were facilitating a process of *re*-construction, rather than attempting to impose an alien economic order obviously helps account for the success of the European experience; perhaps even more so that of Japan (Tabb 1995). But American attitudes toward Asia also remind us that the impact of American hegemony was not a universal reflection of its structurally embedded position, but one that reflected contingent historical and cultural attitudes. As Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002: 575) point out, the distinctive bilateral security architecture that emerged in East Asia reflected American attitudes that saw potential Asian allies as 'part of an alien, and in important ways, inferior community'. Europeans, by contrast, were seen as potential equals – something that was reflected in the multilateral basis of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

But if American power had differential regional impacts in the aftermath of World War II, this should not blind us to the further ambition of the institutional architecture it helped create. One of the most important differences between this earlier period and the present is the relationship between the economic and strategic arms of American foreign policy. As we shall see, the current administration is self-consciously linking these elements to achieve short-term policy objectives. In the earlier period, by contrast, and despite the encompassing brief of the Bretton Woods institutions,⁵ which were designed to encourage and manage international economic integration, a degree of national policy-making autonomy was built into the system (Ruggie 1982). Indeed, American policymakers were willing to tolerate different forms of economic organisation and political practices at a time when the central geopolitical preoccupation was the larger struggle with the Soviet Union (Berger 2003).

In retrospect, therefore, American hegemony in the immediate post-war period is characterised by some significant continuities with, and differences from, the contemporary era. The confrontation with the Soviet Union was clearly a major material constraint on American freedom of action, but one which – somewhat fortuitously – provided the legitimating domestic rationale for an expansionary fiscal

policy both at home and abroad (Kunz 1997: 331). Likewise, and despite the criticisms that the Bretton Woods institutions have subsequently received as a consequence of the evolution of their agendas (mission creep) beyond their initial remit (see, for example, Woods, 1999) they marked the institutional expression of the 'Big Idea' that, according to Bacevich (2002: 88), has continued to inform American strategy: openness. Although Americans may not always have practised domestically what they preached abroad, the idea that America had a special historical mission to make the world a better place has been a continuing theme in American foreign policy, and one that was given direct expression in the Marshall Plan (McDougall 1997: 209). Even if America's post-war policy is seen as ultimately self-serving and part of a larger strategy to secure American interests and dominance, there is no doubt that initiatives like the Marshall Plan contributed not just to the reconstruction of Europe, but to the latter's long-term political stability and integration (Hogan 1987: 438).

America's European involvement may have been 'by invitation' (Lundstead 1986), and actually encouraged by the Europeans in a way that is sharply at odds with the situation in Iraq, but this only serves to highlight the importance—and unpredictability—of the interplay between contingent geopolitics, ideas and institutions. It was America's ability to create an institutionalised, multilateral order to underpin its emerging hegemonic position that gave it a critical degree of legitimacy, and which enhanced the durability of the overall order of which it was a part. By contrast, at a moment when all agree American power is historically unrivalled, Hegemony, as we have defined it, is looking increasingly brittle. When seen in the light of this earlier experience, the reasons for the surprisingly fragile and paradoxical nature of American power in the contemporary period become more apparent.

3. The Securitisation of American Foreign Policy

Global terror demands a global solution...America and our friends must move decisively to take advantage of these new opportunities. This is, then, a period akin to 1945 to 1947, when American leadership expanded the number of free and democratic states...to create a new balance of power that favoured freedom (Rice 2002: 3).

The parallels with the post-war period are in some ways as striking as Condoleezza Rice's remarks suggest. The attacks of September 11 did indeed provide what Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld described as 'the kind of opportunities that World War II offered to refashion the world'.⁶ Significantly, however, the current Bush administration's attempts to refashion the international order would be in line with a blueprint that significantly *pre-dated* the events of 9/11. The new vision for the post-9/11 order had, in fact, been outlined while Bush was still on the campaign trail. As Daalder and Lindsay (2003: 13) note, 'What September 11 provided was the rationale and the opportunity to carry out his revolution'. While some of the rhetoric of the proposed new order may have been replete with the familiar staples of American foreign policy - a commitment to liberty and the promotion of democracy - the substance is radically different from earlier periods and predicated on a unilateral application of American power, a self-conscious linking of formerly discrete strategic and economic issues, and the general securitisation of foreign policy.

Foreign economic policy under Bush has come to be articulated in the language of security. Consequently, the distinction between high politics and low politics is disappearing. The audience for this re-articulation, namely the USA's international economic partners, is made aware of the salience of the now inseparable relationship between two domains of policy that were discursively, if not always practically, discrete for much of the 20th century. There is an accompanying expectation that allies respond accordingly. The aim of securitisation is thus to justify the imposition of conditions and measures in the area of foreign economic policy that would not be considered the norm in this policy domain.⁷ Economic globalisation is now seen not simply in neo-liberal economic terms, but also through the lenses of the national security agenda of the United States. Consequently, economic globalisation is seen not only as a benefit, but also as a 'security problem'.

The events of 9/11 offered the opportunity for a group of what some call 'unilateralist-idealists' (Hassner and Vaisse, 2003), some call the 'new sovereigntists' (Spiro, 2000), some call the 'new exceptionalists' (Hoffmann, 2003) or others call (William Pfaff, 2003: 10) call the 'Washington Utopians' in the Bush Administration, to set in train their project for a new approach to American foreign policy. 9/11

provided the unilateralist idealists (epitomised in the New American Century Project, see <http://www.newamericancentury.org>) a launching pad for an agenda that might be described as a post sovereign approach (see Skidelsky, 2003) to American foreign policy. A key element of this process is the privileging of security in the economics-security nexus or what—for heuristic purposes and borrowing liberally from the Copenhagen School (see Waever 1995)—we have chosen to call the ‘securitisation of economic globalisation’.

While much of this is understood in the context of US security policy proper, perhaps less well articulated are the contours of this unilateralist urge in the wider reaches of US foreign policy and the way they have changed US attitudes towards economic globalisation. The securitisation of globalisation means that US policy towards broader issues in the global economy is being subjugated to the imperatives of the security agenda. As perhaps the most articulate foreign policy spokesmen for the Bush Administration has noted ‘... globalisation is not just economic. It is also a political and security phenomenon ... we cannot turn our backs on conflicts and the violation of human rights in other countries if we want to be secure’ (Tony Blair, cited in Skidelsky, 2003: 32). The new doctrine redefines and does away with the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

This move is historically unprecedented and theoretically challenging. In essence, both the scholarly literature and the empirical historical evidence suggest that multipolarity creates incentives for economic integration and cooperation between allies as well as enhancing economic interaction as a major instrument of cooperative statecraft. By contrast, as we have suggested, the sort of bi-polarity that prevailed during the Cold War era encouraged the separation of economics and politics. The analysis of uni-polarity is less well defined. While resisting the structural realist assumptions about the independence of state power as an analytical variable in international relations, the experience of the early 21st century seems to confirm Michael Mastanduno’s (1998: 827) argument that a uni-polar structure will see the hegemonic state organise economic policy and practice ‘... to line up behind and reinforce its national security strategy’.

In short, there would appear to be a correlation between the degree of dominance of the international system by the US in military terms, and the manner in which it uses economic policy as an arm of security policy. An empirical reading of US policy in the contemporary era shows how a uni-polar moment—in the domains of both trade and finance and at both multilateral and bilateral levels of policy-making, has tempted the hegemon to integrate economic and security policy more closely than under conditions of multi-polarity. It has done so in a manner in which economic policy has become an arm of security policy. US Economic policy—the details of which cannot be discussed here (but see Higgott, 2004a and 2004b)—rather than being a mere instrument of economic relations and statecraft has become a part of the armoury of influence that the US uses to develop a strategy towards potential challengers

When seen as part of a wider context, contemporary US policy, especially the doctrine of pre-emption, challenges the bedrock theoretical assumptions (as opposed to historical and practical applications) of sovereignty as we have known them for much of the post-Westphalian era—sovereignty as the centre of authority, the origin of law and the source of individual and collective security within designated boundaries that distinguished the domesticated interior from the anarchical exterior. As is now well known, the essence of the doctrine of pre-emption was outlined in the *National Security Strategy* (US Government 2002: 15), which declared that the U.S. reserved the right to act pre-emptively to ‘forestall or prevent attacks by our enemies’. Given the open-ended nature of such threats and President Bush’s (2002) claim that America has a moral duty to ‘take the battle to the enemy’, the implications for the sovereign independence of those states the U.S. associates with terrorist activities is profound.

This is not to suggest that sovereignty has previously been an absolute, manageable and uncontested concept, or that sovereignty could ever be equated with an equal form of independence for all states in anything other than the most narrow of legal interpretations (Jackson 1990; Beeson 2003a). Neither does it deny that substantial inroads have been made into the capacity of states to make autonomous economic policy. Clearly, the power of markets under conditions of global liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation and hollowing out of government has grown at the expense of the authority of states. Sovereignty has always been a relative, relational and,

indeed, hypocritical concept. But even a sceptic such as Stephen Krasner noted in the subtitle of his book on *Sovereignty*, that it was at least *Organised Hypocrisy* (Krasner, 1999; but see also Walker, 1993 and Spruyt, 1994) that gave us some rules around which to organise the development of inter-state relations and create a system of norms, principles, rules and institutions above and beyond, or ‘outside’ the state.

The point to emphasise here is that at the outset of his administration, the more radical post-sovereign liberal order envisaged by the Bush Administration was to be under written by American military power, and not by the collective approval of a wider liberal community. As the *National Security Strategy* made clear, ‘[w]hile the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone...’ (US Government 2002: 6). As Rhodes (2003: 136) notes, ‘America’s sovereign responsibilities supersede its commitment to international institutions’. This is of course not a new assertion. While the US has a history of pragmatic involvement in the development of specific international institutions, there has always been a sub-conscious ambivalence in the US attitudes towards multilateralism across the historical period under review in this paper.

In making this assertion, we must be clear what we mean by multilateralism. In the theoretical literature, multilateralism, relates to the management of trans-national problems with three or more parties but operating with a series of acceptable ‘... generalized principles of conduct’ (Ruggie, 1993: 11). That is, the principles of behaviour should take precedence over interests. But we need to distinguish between multilateralism as a principled institutional form of behaviour in international relations (Ruggie, 1993: 8) on the one hand and the actual development and operation of formal international organisations, as the centre-piece of multilateralism as policy practice, on the other.

Overtime, the precedence of principle over interest should lead to collective trust within an institution, amongst players of many different strengths and sizes. A key element in the development of this sense of trust would be a feeling amongst the smaller players that the major actors, especially an erstwhile hegemon, would be willing to accept Martin’s principle of ‘self-binding’. As we have tried to suggest, the comparative historical narrative of the role of the US in the second half of the 20th

century, and especially in the development of the Bretton Woods institutions, demonstrated a US willingness to be 'self-bound' in a way that is not apparent in the contemporary era.⁸

But the distinction between multilateralism as a principled form of behaviour and multilateralism as the conduct of foreign policy through international institutions is often confused in practice. For many observers of US foreign policy, the use of multilateral institutions is believed to be but one policy option among many, rather than driven by any sense of obligation to operate in this manner. US policy had always been either 'instrumental multilateralism' (Foot et al, 2003) or 'ambivalent engagement' (Stewart and Forman, 2002) driven by an understanding of US 'exceptionalism' (Luck, 2003).

It is in this context that the language of the unilateralist that has prevailed in the early 21st century must be located. Multilateralism, be it what we might call the practical realist multilateralism of a Henry Kissinger (2001) or the principled idealist multilateralism of a Joseph Nye (2002), is seen by its opponents as a check on American interests and action. To understand why, we must appreciate not only the ideological objections reflecting the resistance to global cooperation inherent in the increasingly nationalist underpinnings of US foreign policy identified earlier in the work of Leiven (2004a and b). We must also note that a key element in the contemporary theory and practice of global governance—the evolution of *global networks* at the expense of *international hierarchies*—is not welcomed in Washington.

Networks pursue their activities (such as waging unconventional war on states) by using systems of sprawling, horizontally interconnected, networks of private power and authority (Rosenau, 2002, Hall and Biersteker, 2002.) Notwithstanding US military and economic preponderance, the changing structures of authority—or more accurately power—reflected in the growing salience of network governance under conditions of globalisation sit badly with contemporary thinking and practice in US foreign policy. Administrations in Washington, be they Democratic or Republican, have not adjusted well to 'discursive', networked or internet-led conference style

diplomacy that appears to empower non-state actors at the expense of diminished state control over the policy process (see Wedgwood, 2000: 35-40).

Reconciling state-focussed US security instincts with these new networked based patterns of activity—influenced not only by states, but non-state actors, trans-national forces and new kinds of threats—as the evidence of the 21st century suggests, is proving harder for US Governments to come to terms with. The blurring of the borders between what is domestic and what is international in the policy process has challenged traditional US understandings of national interest. This is especially so in those policy domains where trans-national decision-making—for example, on issues such as the environment and climate change (cf. US attitudes towards the Kyoto protocol) or the application of international law (cf. US attitudes towards the ICC)—clashes with US domestic law or runs up against a US conception of national security.

Multilateralism for large sections of the US policy community, at best, implies the opportunity for others to free ride on the US's material support. At worst, it implies sovereignty dilution and unwanted entanglements. This is not simply to argue that the US has repudiated multilateralism as a *principled institutional form of governance in its entirety*. Rather, the US has become more instrumental in its choice of issue areas in which it will adopt a multilateral approach as a matter of *preferred policy practice*. It has adopted a 'pick and mix' approach. As can be seen from its efforts to establish a post-Saddam order in Iraq it will accept 'legitimizing' and burden sharing multilateral engagements provided they suit its preferred policy positions and do not constrain its ability for manoeuvre.

But clearly, the unilateralist discourse—in which the US expressed fears that the burden of consensus building might constrain it from acting freely in the pursuit of its stated ideals of promoting democracy, human rights and free trade—has been in the ascendancy in the 21st century and has found its fullest articulation in contemporary US policy in Iraq (see Dodge 2003). But the removal of Saddam Hussein has been but one episode, theoretically at least, in a wider agenda for a world the US 'seeks to create' and the manner in which it proposes to undertake this task (Rhodes, 2003: 132).

Unilateral action, backed by American military power, is the *modus operandi* to be adopted. We do not yet know the degree to which US staying power will back up this rhetoric. But failing to live up to expectations will only reinforce that already strong stream of cynicism that greets American motives in many parts of world opinion (see Prestowitz, 2003:1-14). In short, while the rhetoric of the early 21st century has been idealist, we have yet to see whether the practice will confirm this principle, or whether the realist instinct to privilege the US interest in the international system without actually changing the system will re-occur as it has done in times in past.

Thus, stripped of its essentials, the purpose of current American strategy seems to be the use of its military, technical, and what it believes to be its moral, superiority to advance a very specific view of liberalism and freedom. The simple and universal view of freedom espoused by the neo-conservative idealists currently driving US foreign policy is rarely reflected in political practice. Moreover, the ideas of liberalism and freedom found in large pockets of the American right is alien to that which exists in many of the world's other developed democracies, and indeed also within significant streams of political thinking within the United States (see Foner, 1998 and Richardson, 2001).

Contrary to the manner in which ideas of liberalism and freedom are articulated by the neo-conservatives within the Bush Administration, these are contested concepts and not universal truths. The Bush view of liberalism assumes that it has universalist properties, and does so at the very time when many traditionally significant proponents of liberalism are abandoning this conceit. (For a discussion see Richardson, 2002, 3). The Bush view has, to-date, taken no account of the fact that liberal norms embedded in the political cultures of many Western societies might not be similarly suited to societies with different philosophical and cultural underpinnings. In essence, the view of liberal freedom emanating from the contemporary neo-conservative community in the US is what Richardson calls 'a single value concept of liberalism'. It is this that sets it apart from more traditional and moderate and pluralist understanding of the concept (Richardson, 2002: 8-9). The Bush view appears to represent a strange mix of Isaiah Berlin's (1969) negative and positive views of liberty, with an emphasis on the right to the negative freedom to choose on the one hand, and accompanied by a positive requirement, for others at

least, to accept certain prescribed moral truths on the other. This is, at the very least, a self-contradictory theoretical position.

Generalisations should not be made about US foreign policy purely on the basis a reading of the Bush era alone, especially regarding attitudes towards multilateral institutions. As we have suggested, historical patterns present a more complex picture. The relationship between US foreign policy and multilateralism has always been, ambivalent and instrumental (Stewart, 2002: 12-13 and Luck, 2003). Thus, any longer term prospects for a more cooperative and multilateral international order are not to be explained by traditional realist understandings of power balancing against a uni-polar order moving in the direction of a multi-polar order. US allies, when their Cold War dependence on US power was manifest, may have readily acquiesced in the US *ad hoc* approach to multilateralism. But things changed, and continue to change, in the post-Cold War era.

It is not necessary to accede to Robert Kagan's overdrawn suggestion that Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus (2003) to see sharp differences between continental European and American approach towards world politics in general and global institutional cooperation in particular. The EU and the US differ on questions of 'partnership' burden sharing', and 'exceptionalism' as well as approaches to global economic management (see Wallace 2002: 145-6). For the Bush Administration, what drives contemporary world order is 'primacy' and freedom to manoeuvre. For Europeans (and, we might note, especially the UK before Tony Blair became entangled in the Bush project) it is 'globalisation' (Daalder, 2003: 151-53). Europe, in theory if not always in practice, exhibits a stronger normative attitude towards multilateral governance structures than is to be found across the spectrum of the US policy community. It is inconceivable, for example, that any US administration would prepare a document similar to *The EU and the UN: The Choice of Multilateralism* (Commission of the European Communities) that argues for a 'systematic *integration of multilateral and bilateral policy objectives*' (their emphasis) (2003: 10). Similarly, the EU disposition for multi-level-governance and 'sovereignty pooling' is equally incomprehensible to US foreign policy makers.

Without over-stating the case, similar distinctions may also be drawn from East Asia in the early 21st century. It too, places a greater stress on multilateral and regional cooperation, although, as in Europe, there may be a marked disconnect between theory and rhetoric on the one hand and application and practice on the other. But we live in an era of the 'new regionalism' in East Asia that has progressed apace since the financial crises of the latter part of the 1990s. The key elements of the new regionalism have been enhanced regional economic dialogue and interaction both *amongst* the states of Northeast Asia (China, Japan and South Korea) and *between* these states and the states of Southeast Asia through the development of the ASEAN + Three (or APT) process. To be sure, these regional cooperative dialogues remain rudimentary when contrasted with the level of integration to be found in Europe, but these dialogues have been spurred on by the perceived limitations of the multilateral system and the changing relationships of the major regional actors to the USA (see Beeson 2003b; Deiter and Higgott, 2003; Stubbs, 2002).

In short, US Allies, especially the Europeans and, to a lesser extent the Asians, seem intent on creating an institutional order less dependent on American power, more dependent on rules and principles and in which the US is granted less prerogative and licence than in the past. Their rhetoric is certainly different to that which emanates from the USA. But so to is their practice as illustrated, for example, in the contrast between the increasingly systematic use of the WTO dispute settlement mechanism by the EU and Asia on the one hand, and the across the board resistance (UN, ICC, Kyoto, Land mines etc) by the US to containment within multilateral institutions on the other.

These differences having been noted, it behoves us to remember that the current historical rupture in thinking between Washington and other points of the global compass is so sharp that much of what was learned in the post-Cold War decade is in danger of being forgotten. Prior to the rise to power of the neo-conservatives, it was possible to identify a (see Risse, 2002) high degree of trust and loyalty amongst the ruling trans-Atlantic policy communities. Such was the degree of this trust that even serious conflicts (over trade, for example) did not threaten the ability of the wider structure of institutions and shared expectations to contain them. It is because the ideological position and behaviour of the neo-conservatives is so far to the unilateral

end of the curve that trust in the US to use of its power responsibly in what Risse calls a 'liberal security community' appears to be waning.

Conclusion: Hegemony and Institutionalism in an Era of Ambiguity

We live an era of ambiguity. A number of important similarities and differences emerge from a comparison of America's evolving hegemonic position now and in the aftermath of WWII which merit emphasis. But at the same time, we are in an era in which history offers us little by way of assured lesson learning. While the U.S. was and is still plainly the most powerful country on the planet, its current position looks less assured than the, by now routine, comparisons with the Roman Empire might suggest. The U.S. is widely considered to have achieved a position of uni-polar dominance in an era in which it is confronted by no serious rival. Equally, market based capitalism as a form of economic organisation—notwithstanding differences of opinion about how best to manage it—is similarly unchallenged. Yet, it is clearly not inappropriate to ask if we might have reached the high-water mark of American power? While not insensitive to many other previous premature efforts to signal the high water mark of US hegemony, let us consider this issue by way of conclusion.

The invasion of Iraq highlights not only US power, but also many of America's potential vulnerabilities. Crucially, the entire project relied on the efforts of a rather exclusive and narrowly-based 'coalition of the willing', which not only highlighted divisions between formerly staunch allies in North American and Western Europe, but which lacked the institutional imprimatur of the most important intergovernmental organisation of the era. The UN's failure to endorse the conflict meant that from the outset the U.S. lacked the sort of broadly based support and legitimacy that distinguished its position in the post-WWII period. When coupled with the practical difficulty of restoring order, let alone establishing democracy in Iraq, the appropriate historical comparison without overdrawing the analogy may rather be with Vietnam, than post-war European construction (Kolko 2003).

More fundamentally, perhaps, the war highlights America's economic vulnerabilities, too. The U.S.'s budgetary position had already been transformed under the Bush administration as a consequence of economically dubious, ideologically motivated tax

cuts. Lest we forget, the Vietnam War is a reminder of the way security issues can transform economic policy with profound, unexpected, long-term consequences for both the U.S. domestic economy and the international system more generally. The war in Iraq has made the fiscal position dramatically worse (*The Economist* 2003). For all its military might, the US remains reliant on other countries—especially in East Asia—to continue funding its debt and consumption patterns (Goodman 2003).

It is here that our moral hazard argument returns. To-date, the US has been able to spend on overseas ventures reliant in the knowledge that others will share, indeed carry, most of the costs. The assumption, if never explicitly stated, has been that others would be unwilling to cease funding the debt because of the implications it has for the continued health of their own economies. But things are changing. In contrast to the first Gulf War—which thanks to the support of wealthy allies (notably Japan and Germany) was effectively revenue neutral for the US—the cost of the overthrow of Saddam has been borne more or less exclusively by the US. In the first Gulf War, as Fred Bergsten noted, ‘collective leadership’ meant that America led and America collected (cited in Cooper *et al*, 1991: 439). In the second Gulf War when it has come to the issues of bearing the financial costs of the war the US has been supported by a ‘coalition of the unwilling’. Similarly, there is a remarked reluctance on the part of major economies such as France and Germany to provide large amounts of financial, or indeed any other kind, of support as part of a post war rapprochement with the US. There are other example of growing unwillingness to fall into line with US demands for economic adjustment to support US interests and policy preferences. For example, China’s has exhibited a total disinterest in addressing its trade surplus with the US via a currency adjustment, notwithstanding considerable US pressure. This can be contrasted with Japanese responses, in similar circumstances in the 1980s, when the Plaza and Louvre Accords saw major upward adjustments in the strength of the Yen .

The contemporary era in US foreign policy stands in marked contrast with the earlier periods in other ways, in terms of both content and application. As Lisa Martin (2003) has persuasively argued, the United States has effectively adopted an *ad hoc* approach towards multilateralism in particular. The very idea that the dominant global power might need to act in a self-binding way has been forcefully disregarded

over the early years of the 21st century. For multilateralism—as an important institutional form of governance—to work, rules must bind, or at least appear to bind, the hegemon, as well as the smaller players. Historically, especially in the immediate post World War II era, the US behaved in such a way, with an eye to the future. 2004 might be seeing the Bush Administration stepping back from the harshest phase of its antipathy to multilateralism of 2002/3. But, even given continued difficulties securing the post-war settlement in Iraq, it still resists the notion of investing in multilateralism as a set of principles and norms as opposed to but one potentially useful tool at its disposal with which to make foreign policy. As Martin notes:

‘Turning to multilateralism only under duress and when it appears convenient demonstrates a lack of commitment, even an implicit rejection of the principles of multilateralism. ... This hollows out the core of such organisations, as they no longer provide the self-binding function they once did. ... Without the self-binding of the hegemon, multilateral organisations become empty shells (2003: 14).

If we follow Martin’s logic, then even with a change of Administration, in Washington, the trust deficit that has been created is likely to remain for some time to come. The reputation of multilateralism as a principal (and principled) institutional form of global governance in both the economic and, it goes without saying, the security domain in the early years of the 21st century, is badly damaged. It will take time to tell whether this damage can be undone. More generally, some scholars are beginning to ask, as indeed do we by implication in this paper, if the US may have been undermining the very basis of its own hegemonic position in the early 21st century. According to John Ikenberry (2004: 20), for example, the ‘neo-fundamentalist’ security policies of Bush Administration have ‘squandered America’s moral authority’ and led to dramatically wrong strategic thinking that has undermined US credibility, prestige, security relationships and goodwill; and done so to such an extent that it will take many years to undo.

A change of heart in the US is not all that is required to undo this situation. This is a *necessary*, but not *sufficient* condition to (re) build positive structures of global economic governance and it is not axiomatic. Any administration will be subject to pressures to respond to increasingly assertive domestic interests that—like US allies

in the international domain—have been freed from the disciplines of the Cold War. Growing numbers of politically powerful domestic actors, resorting to increasingly nationalist rhetoric about what they see as the negative impact of globalisation on jobs and welfare, increasingly rail against the US accepting binding multilateral commitments or indeed undertaking other foreign policy initiatives in general.

A hegemon, *any hegemon*, inevitably attracts enmity and resistance. But an *altruistic* (Kindleberger, 1973) or a *benign* (Strange, 1987) US hegemony, capable of delivering global public goods, has clearly had, until recently, a longstanding degree of acceptance and implicit (if not overt) legitimacy, in large quarters of world opinion. The same cannot be said in the contemporary in which the US—in what many sees as an assertively nationalist projection of a narrowly conceived interest (Bhagwati and Panagariya's 'selfish hegemon', 2003:13)—demonstrates little or no concern for problems other than those which affect it directly and in which the issue of the legitimacy of the hegemon's behaviour ceases to be one of implicit acceptance and becomes one of explicit scrutiny.⁹ Notwithstanding the continuities and changes we have identified in US foreign policy over the period under review in this essay, this difference—between a relatively benign, albeit instrumental, hegemony underwritten by liberal principles and institutions on the one hand and a more selfish hegemony, underscored by a stronger Jacksonian nationalism, on the other—is the key difference between the two eras.

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Endnotes

¹ This influence is more often indirect than direct, usually via the work of Robert Cox, 1987 and Stephen Gill, 1993. See also, Bieler and Morton 2001, 2003, 2004; and Rupert, 2003

² By the time George Marshall articulated the contours of the Marshall Plan in his celebrated speech at Harvard in 1947, George Kennan's analysis of the nature and ambitions of the Soviet Union had become the accepted view of 'virtually all the top policymakers' (Hogan 1987: 44). For the content of Kennan's highly influential 'long telegram', see Kennan (1997 [1947]).

³ For the seminal insider's account see, Acheson (1969). More generally, see Kunz (1997) and Latham (1997).

⁴ Significantly, the predominantly bilateral disbursement of aid in the post-war period actually established a general pattern for the next thirty years, one that reinforced America's position at the centre of a distinctive 'hub and spokes' security architecture that became the model for U.S. engagement outside Western Europe. See Milward (1984: 113-14).

⁵ The Bretton Woods institutions were the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (later replaced by the World Trade Organization) is invariably lumped together with them. For an overview see Eichengreen and Kenen (1994).

⁶ Cited in Bacevich (2002: 227).

⁷ Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the relationship between negotiations on Free Trade Arrangements and support for US foreign policy. For a detailed study see Higgott, 2004a and b. A clear example of this possibility can be seen in Thailand's crackdown on terrorism – something the Thai government hopes will win it a bilateral trade deal with the U.S. See, Crispin (2003).

⁸ Higgott, (2004c) provides a detailed empirical discussion of US attitudes towards self-binding in the early years of both the IMF and the GATT.

⁹ As Ian Clark recently noted, 'we are more likely to ask questions about the legitimacy of a system when things appear to be going wrong' (Clark, 2003: 75.)