

Preserving Hegemony: The Strategic Tasks Facing the United States

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The Debate: Tellis

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THE US EXPERIENCE OF HEGEMONY in global politics is still very young. Although the United States entered the international system as a great power early in the twentieth century, its systemic impact was not felt until World War II and, soon thereafter, its power was constrained by the presence of another competitor, the Soviet Union. Only after the demise of this challenger in 1991 has the United States been liberated in the exercise of its hegemonic power but — as has become quite evident in the past two decades — this application of power, although potent in its impact when well exercised, is also beset by important limitations. In any event, the now significant, century-long, involvement of the United States in international politics as a great power tends to obscure the reality of how short its hegemonic phase has actually been thus far.

This hegemony is by no means fated to end any time soon, however, given that the United States remains predominant by most conventional indicators of national power. The character of the United States’ hegemonic behavior in the future will thus remain an issue of concern both within the domestic polity and internationally. Yet the juvenescence of the United State’s “unipolar moment,” combined with the disorientation produced by the September 11 attacks, ought to restrain any premature generalization that the imperial activism begun by the Clinton administration, and which the Bush administration took to its most spirited apotheosis, would in some way come to define the permanent norm of US behavior in the global system. In all probability, it is much more likely that the limitations on US

power witnessed in Afghanistan and Iraq will produce a more phlegmatic and accommodating United States over the longer term, despite the fact that the traditional US pursuit of dominance — understood as the quest to maintain a preponderance of power, neutralize threatening challengers, and protect freedom of action, goals that go back to the foundations of the republic — is unlikely to be extinguished any time soon.

Precisely because the desire for dominance is likely to remain a permanent feature of US geopolitical ambitions — even though how it is exercised will certainly change in comparison to the Bush years — the central task facing the next administration will still pertain fundamentally to the issue of US power. This concern manifests itself through the triune challenges of: redefining the United States' role in the world, renewing the foundations of US strength, and recovering the legitimacy of US actions. In other words, the next administration faces the central task of clarifying the character of US hegemony, reinvigorating the material foundations of its power, and securing international support for its policies.

The challenge of comprehensively strengthening US power at this juncture, when the United States is still in the early phase of its unipolar role in global politics, arises importantly from the fact that the hegemony it has enjoyed since 1991 represents a “prize” deriving from victory in intense geopolitical competition with another great power. The historical record suggests that international politics can be unkind to such victors over the long term. A careful scrutiny of the hegemonic cycles since 1494 confirms quite clearly that power transitions at the core of the global system often occur because successes in systemic struggles — of which the Cold War is but one example — can irreparably weaken otherwise victorious hegemonies. The annals of the past actually corroborate the surprising proposition that no rising challenger, however capable, has ever succeeded, at least thus far, in supplanting any prevailing hegemony through cold or hot war. Over the centuries, Spain, France, Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union all tried in different ways but failed.

This reassuring fact notwithstanding, hegemonic transitions still occurred regularly in international politics, a reality that points to two critical insights about succession struggles in the international system — which is a subject that ought to be of great significance to the United States and its allies as well as to its adversaries. First, struggles for hegemony in global politics are rarely limited to dyadic encounters between states. These struggles involve not only the existing hegemon and the rising challenger as the preeminent antagonists — roles that many expect will be played respectively by the United States and China over the long term — but also the entire cast of international characters, including non-state actors involved in economic processes, and the nature of their involvement in the competition become relevant to the succession process. Thus, the nature of the alliances orchestrated and managed by the United States (and possibly China as well) in the future, the relationship between state entities and the global economic system and the relative burdens borne by every actor involved in this contest become relevant to the outcome.

Second, and equally importantly, who wins in the ensuing struggle — whether that struggle is short or long, peaceful or violent — is as important as by how much. This is particularly relevant because the past record unerringly confirms that the strongest surviving state in the winning coalition usually turns out to be the new primate after the conclusion of every systemic struggle. Both Great Britain and the United States secured their respective ascendancies in this way. Great Britain rose through the wreckage of the wars with Louis XIV and with Napoleon. The United States did so through the carnage of the hot wars with Hitler and Hirohito, finally achieving true hegemony through the detritus of the Cold War with Stalin and his successors. If the United States is to sustain this hard-earned hegemony over the long term, while countering as necessary a future Chinese challenge should it emerge, Washington will need to amass the largest differential in power relative not only to its rivals but also to its friends and allies. Particularly in

an era of globalization, this objective cannot be achieved without a conscious determination to follow sensible policies that sustain economic growth, minimize unproductive expenditures, strengthen the national innovation system, maintain military capabilities second to none and enjoin political behaviors that evoke the approbation of allies and neutral states alike.

The successful pursuit of such policies will enable the United States to cope more effectively with near-term challenges as well, including the war on terrorism and managing threatening regional powers, and will ineluctably require — to return full circle — engaging the central tasks identified earlier as facing the new US administration. These tasks involve the need to satisfactorily define the character of desirable US hegemony, the need for sound policies that will renew the foundations of US strength, and the need to recover the legitimacy of US purposes and actions. What is clearly implied is that the principal burdens facing the next US president transcend Asia writ large. The success of these pursuits, however, will inevitably impact Asia in desirable ways, even as the resolution of several specifically Asian problems would invariably contribute to the conclusive attainment of these larger encompassing goals.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

US efforts in three areas will reaffirm its role as global leader: supporting a durable framework for international trade, maintaining unqualified military supremacy and ensuring the delivery of certain public goods, such as peace and security, freedom of navigation and a clean environment.

The renewal of traditional US economic might requires policies that favor growth and innovation, increased capital and labor pools, and sustained pursuit of total factor productivity.

Legitimacy is an important facet of US power that has eroded over the last eight years. The US can secure legitimacy for future political acts by shaping world opinion through a combination of decisiveness, cultivation of key allied support and attentiveness to the views of others.

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