



Research Paper

American Hegemony Under Strain: Economic, Military, and Diplomatic Challenges

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I. Introduction

The concept of U.S. hegemony has been central to shaping the global liberal order post World War II. Anchored in principles such as free trade, multilateralism, and the promotion of democracy, the U.S. has acted as the primary architect and guarantor of this order. However, in recent decades, signs of a relative decline in U.S. dominance have become increasingly evident. This decline stems from multiple factors which includes economic competition from rising powers like China, strategic overreach, domestic political polarization, and growing doubt or questions about the benefits of globalization.

The weakening of U.S. hegemony raises profound questions about the future of the global liberal order. As traditional pillars of this order face challenges, there is growing uncertainty about whether emerging powers will support, reshape, or reject its foundational norms and institutions. The evolving global dynamics may lead to the adaptation of the liberal order in a multipolar context or a fragmentation into competing spheres of influence.

The decline of U.S. hegemony has emerged as a critical issue in international relations, raising questions about the future of global order, the stability of multilateral institutions, and the sustainability of liberal democratic values. Hegemony, in the context of international relations, refers to the dominance of a single state that exerts economic, political, and military influence on the global stage. Since the end of World War II, the United States has played this hegemonic role, shaping the rules and norms of the international system. Its power has underpinned global economic stability, security, and the promotion of liberal values. The United States has long served as the anchor of the global economy. Its leadership in establishing institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) was instrumental in promoting economic liberalization and fostering an interconnected global marketplace. U.S. economic power has supported trade agreements, ensured financial stability, and facilitated global economic recovery during crises, such as the 2008 financial meltdown. A decline in U.S. economic influence could fragment the global economy into competing blocs, reducing cooperation and increasing economic volatility (Ikenberry, 2011).

Through its vast military capabilities and strategic alliances, particularly NATO, the United States has acted as a guarantor of global security. The "Pax Americana" era marked by reduced conflicts and a relatively stable international order was underpinned by U.S. military interventions and deterrence strategies. For example, U.S. engagement in Asia and the Middle East ensured regional stability by containing threats such as Soviet expansion during the Cold War and later, terrorism. A weakening U.S. security role could lead to power vacuums, increased militarization, and instability in conflict-prone regions (Layne, 2018).

U.S. hegemony has supported the global spread of liberal democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law. Its influence on global governance has been evident in institutions like the United Nations and its advocacy for multilateralism. A diminished U.S. role could embolden authoritarian regimes and challenge the primacy of liberal democratic values (Acharya, 2017).

Economic factors: Globalization, rising powers

The decline of U.S. hegemony is primarily driven by economic factors, particularly globalization and the rise of emerging powers like China and India. Globalization has reallocated economic opportunities, allowing countries in the Global South to strengthen their economic and political standing. This transformation has significantly impacted the U.S., which once held a dominant position in global economic systems due to its unparalleled industrial base and technological innovation. However, the transfer of capital, technology, and production capabilities to developing nations has reduced the United States' relative economic advantage, accelerating to the decline of its hegemonic position.

China has emerged as the leading example of a rising power harnessing globalization to its advantage. With its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has expanded its trade networks, infrastructure investments, and economic influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe. In contrast the United States, has struggled to counter these initiatives effectively, partly due to its focus on military expenditures rather than economic collaboration. Scholars argue that China's rising GDP and influence in multilateral organizations signal a shift toward a multipolar world. Predictions that China's economy will surpass that of the U.S. by 2027 highlight the extent of this economic transformation (Abbas & Shah, 2021).

One of globalizations critical outcomes has been the rise of regional alliances and multilateral organizations that challenge U.S.-dominated structures. BRICS, for instance, has amplified the collective voice of emerging economies, reducing reliance on Western-led financial systems. Similarly, China's focus on building alternative economic and trade framework reflects its dedication to reshaping global power dynamics. These changes not only challenge U.S. dominance but also demonstrate the capacity of emerging powers to compete effectively in a globalized world.

The ongoing transformation in global power dynamics involves more than economic shifts but also about the redefinition of influence in a highly interconnected world. Emerging powers are using tools like digital connectivity, technological innovation, and strategic infrastructure investments to strengthen their global presence. These nations are reshaping global norms by advocating for reforms in international institutions and emphasizing regional cooperation over unilateral dominance. Consequently, the global order is becoming more inclusive of diverse perspective, making it harder for any single power, including the U.S., to unilaterally dictate the course of international relations.

The concept of "Imperial Overstretch" provides insight into the United States' declining influence. By prioritizing excessively on military spending to maintain global dominance, the U.S. has diverted resources away from critical areas like industrial growth and innovation. Meanwhile, rising powers have strategically invested in their economies, enabling them to grow rapidly without the burden of heavy military expenditures. This shift highlights the limitations of relying on military strength as the primary tool of influence in a world increasingly shaped by economic dynamics (Abbas & Shah, 2021).

Globalization and the emergence of new economic powers have further accelerated the decline of U.S. hegemony. As the global system transitions toward multipolar structure, the United States faces the challenge of adjusting to a world where its dominance is no longer guaranteed. To remain relevant, the U.S. must transition its focus from military primacy to fostering economic collaboration and cooperation with emerging powers. This strategic recalibration will be crucial for maintaining sustainable influence in an evolving international order.

Military challenges: Proxy conflicts, shifting alliances

The United States has long served as the linchpin of the global liberal order, anchoring international security through its military preponderance and alliance webs. But this has created critical military challenges to the stability of that order with the erosion of U.S. hegemony over the past several decades. Two key military dynamics proxy conflicts and shifting alliances outline how the weakening of American primacy is redrawing the lines of global power. These trends have not only rendered U.S. influence weaker but also rendered power revisionists like Russia and China bold enough to challenge the rules-based system, which has direct implications for liberal ideas of multilateralism and sovereignty of states.

Proxy conflicts have reappeared as one of the central features of contemporary geopolitics, sidelining the return of the great power rivalry. Unlike direct military confrontations, proxy wars facilitate indirect advancement of strategic interests by states, reducing the chances of escalation. For the U.S., such conflicts test its capacity to project power and sustain influence in critical regions. The war in Ukraine, for instance, has become a focal point of U.S.-Russia competition. While Ukraine is not a formal proxy of the United States, Western military and economic support for Kyiv has framed the conflict as a battleground for broader ideological and geopolitical struggles. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in 2022 represent a direct challenge to the U.S.-led order, as Moscow seeks to reassert dominance in the post-Soviet space (Ikenberry, 2018). The U.S. response, characterized by extensive aid to Ukraine, has strained its military resources and exposed fissures within NATO. Disputes over the level of support for Ukraine, and European concerns over escalation, reflect the challenges of sustaining alliance cohesion in long-term conflicts.

The Syrian Civil War (2011–present) also illustrates the intricacies of proxy dynamics in a multipolar world. The United States supported opposition forces looking to overthrow the Assad regime, while Russia and Iran intervened to support their ally. The presence of non-state actors such as ISIS and Kurdish militias further splintered the conflict, making it a confused playing field for competing powers. The U.S. withdrawal from northern Syria in 2019 under the Trump administration ceded strategic ground to Russia and Turkey, undermining Washington's credibility as a reliable security partner (Brands & Edel, 2019). This withdrawal was a larger expression of war-weariness and unwillingness to continue lengthy military occupations, giving adversaries more license to exploit the resulting power vacuums. Proxy wars thus undermine U.S. military hegemony by pouring

resources into unwinnable wars and dissipating domestic political will for intervention. The liberal order relies on the United States playing the role of a "security provider," but overstretch in multiple theatres undermines its ability to confront emerging threats.

The erosion of U.S. hegemony is also facilitated by the fragmentation of traditional alliances. The alliance system led by the United States, which was a key feature of the post-1945 order, is being reshaped as partners increasingly diversify their security relationships and question American leadership. For instance, NATO is experiencing internal stress due to shifting U.S. priorities. Threats from the Trump administration to withdraw from the alliance and demands for increased European defense spending created distrust among its members. While the Biden administration has restated commitments to NATO, damage to transatlantic trust is already done. France and Germany are now demanding "strategic autonomy," with calls to lessen dependence on the U.S. for military guarantees, including efforts through the European Defence Fund (Brands & Edel, 2019). This effort towards self-reliance indicates a slow disengagement from U.S. leadership, even as NATO faces new Russian belligerence.

U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific region are hedging their bets alongside increasing tensions with China. Japan and South Korea, strongly reliant on U.S. security guarantees, have quickly deepened economic ties with Beijing to avoid antagonizing their largest trading partner. Middle powers such as India and Vietnam pursue multi-alignment strategies, partnering with the U.S. on security issues while maintaining diplomatic and economic autonomy (Ikenberry, 2018). The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in the form of the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia best demonstrates attempts at balancing China without the creation of a treaty entrenching military obligation. But Quad's absence of institutionalized obligations bodes poorly for the sustainability of collective action given the lack of uncontested U.S. leadership.

Revisionist powers are pressing their advantage from these developments by building new alternative security structures. China's BRI, for example, has military elements in the form of port access agreements and overseas bases in Djibouti and Cambodia, which increase its ability to project power around the world. Russia has also reinvigorated the CSTO and strengthened its partnerships with Iran and Turkey, creating a network of alliances that bypass U.S.-led institutions. These parallel structures allow autocratic states to challenge the liberal order by providing alternative forms of security guarantees that the Americans cannot match.

Proxy conflicts and changing alliances alike reveal a declining U.S. capacity for maintaining the liberal world order. Military overextension and squandering of political capital through proxy wars, while alliance fragmentation combines to weaken the collective strength of the Western group of nations. These conjunctive factors have given powers seeking revision room to recast the international structure. Russian occupation of Crimea clearly broke a core post-1945 norm proscribing conquest; still, efforts by the US and its close allies to levy significant consequences fail. In their turn, Beijing's replete militarization in the South China Sea is against the cardinal premise of freedom of navigation-the defining liberal order aspect-and yet nearby states fear engaging directly with a confrontational People's Republic. The erosion of U.S. hegemony thus emboldens authoritarian regimes to act with impunity, undermining the rules-based system.

The consequences of the decline in U.S. leadership are vividly seen in global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. In the absence of American-led coordination, China and Russia have used vaccine diplomacy to their advantage geopolitically, thus bringing out the vacuum created by retreating U.S. influence. This failure therefore speaks to the risks of a fragmented international system, where the exploitation of crises by competing powers to advance individual interests at the expense of collective action is prevalent.

Central to the concept of the decline in U.S. hegemony and its implications for the global liberal order lie the military challenges posed by proxy conflicts and shifting alliances. Proxy wars reveal the limits of American power projection; shifting alliances, on the other hand, reflect eroding trust in U.S. leadership. All these dynamics weaken the institutional and normative foundations of the liberal order, paving the way for a more contested and multipolar world. To counter these trends, the United States must reorient its grand strategy toward greater burden-sharing with allies, aversion to overextension in periphery conflicts, and recommitment to the institutions of diplomacy that buttress multilateralism. The window for such change is rapidly closing, however, as the post-Cold War order is becoming increasingly overtaken by a high-intensity period of great power rivalry.

Political Polarization and Economic Inequality in the United State

Political polarization and economic inequality are two pressing domestic issues that significantly impact the functioning of democracy in the United States. Both phenomena have intensified in recent decades, influencing governance, public trust, and social cohesion. Political polarization has led to gridlock and inefficiency in legislative processes, while economic inequality has contributed to social fragmentation and political unrest. These issues, though distinct, are interconnected and have exacerbated the challenges facing American democracy.

Political polarization in the United States has shifted from an elite phenomenon to a mass-level issue, dividing the electorate. (Ross, 2024). Traditionally, polarization was more of an elite phenomenon, measured by party unity in roll call votes and ideological positioning. However, recent studies suggest that polarization has

become widespread in society, manifesting as affective polarization, where individuals have deep-seated animosity toward members of opposing political groups.

The rise of partisan media, social media, and targeted political messaging has entrenched polarization further. (Ross, 2024). It amplifies ideological divisions by making echo chambers, where people hear only the same views that already exist in their minds. In this way, it has become an environment in which political opponents are not merely ideological adversaries but existential threats to national values and identity. This polarization leads to legislative gridlock because cooperation from across the aisle is rare, compromise comes with the smell of political weakness, and not democratic 'necessity'.

Polarization brings with it the most concrete consequences for electoral processes and democratic norms. With elections increasingly being cast as do-or-die battles, mistrust in electoral institutions is growing, and democratic norms such as peaceful transfers of power are under severe erosion. The 2020 US presidential election events elucidate how polarization can result in the destabilization of democratic institutions. Claims of election fraud, failure to concede, and violent resistance to the results of an election underscore the risks of extreme partisan division (Ross, 2024).

Rising economic inequalities in the United States, starting from the late 20th century, have raised political tensions and fueled social unrest. (Ross, 2024). The gap between the rich and the rest has widened greatly, driven by globalization, technological advance, and policy decisions that favor capital against labor. As the concentration of wealth increases among a few percentiles, economic mobility has worsened, thus further fueling protests toward democratic institutions.

The decline of the middle class and the increasing economic precarity of working-class Americans have fueled populist movements. (Ross, 2024). Many Americans, particularly in rural and deindustrialized areas, feel left behind by economic policies that prioritize corporate interests and global trade over local job security. This economic frustration has translated into political support for candidates who promise to challenge the status quo, often through populist rhetoric that targets political and economic elites.

Economic inequality also has an impact on political participation and representation. Research indicates that those who are wealthy have disproportionate influence in politics due to their capacity to finance campaigns, lobby politicians, and control public discourse. Policies that may help reduce inequality, such as progressive taxation and social welfare programs, are usually met with political opposition. This cycle perpetuates economic inequality and reinforces political inequality, further isolating lower-income citizens from the political process.

Political polarization and economic inequality are interconnected. (Ross, 2024). Such economic disparities do lead to perceived injustice and divisions in society; political actors would then capitalize on these divisions in order to polarize further the political landscape. For example, political leaders exploit economic grievances through mobilizing political bases by telling the electorate of elections as contests between the "elite" against the "ordinary people." Through such populist message, polarization actually worsens political cooperation across lines.

Thus, economic inequality also takes on direct forms in affecting the nature of political involvement. Politically, affluent citizens are more active and influential; conversely, citizens with lower incomes often feel disempowered and disengaged. This imbalanced nature of political participation leads to policies that favor the rich and deepen economic and political divisions.

Addressing political polarization and economic inequality requires a multifaceted approach that involves policy reforms, institutional changes, and rebuilding public trust in democratic processes. Some of the underlying grievances fueling polarization can be mitigated by reducing economic inequality through progressive taxation, social safety nets, and investment in education and healthcare. Concurrently, encouraging political discourse, reforming electoral systems, and limiting the influence of money in politics can bridge partisan divides and make democracy more resilient. If these issues are not addressed together, American democracy will continue to face serious challenges to stability and inclusiveness.

Diplomatic shifts: Retreat from multilateralism

The United States' withdrawal from multilateral institutions and agreements is a critical diplomatic realignment that reflects its waning hegemony and destabilizes the international liberal order. Since World War II, U.S. leadership in multilateral institutions like the United Nations, NATO, and climate agreements has been pivotal to sustaining international cooperation and enforcing rules-based norms. Yet, recent withdrawals from crucial agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization (WHO) symbolize a larger pattern of unilateralism that undermines U.S. power, encourages competitor powers, and undermines trust in American leadership. This section contends that the American pullback from multilateralism hastens America's hegemonic decline by undermining global governance, relinquishing leadership to emerging powers such as China, and dividing collective action against transnational threats.

The Paris Agreement Withdrawal: Climate Leadership Vacuum

The United States withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2017 during the Trump presidency is an example of diplomatic unilateralism threatening international cooperation against existential threats. The Paris Agreement, signed by 195 countries in 2015, was a historic multilateral agreement aimed at capping global warming via nationally determined carbon reduction goals. As the world's second-largest greenhouse gas emitter, the U.S. was instrumental in negotiating the agreement, using its hegemonic power to facilitate compromises between developed and developing countries (Falkner, 2016). The Trump administration's withdrawal from the accord, presented as a protection of American economic interests, marked a withdrawal from climate leadership, undermining U.S. credibility and the effectiveness of the agreement.

The withdrawal left a void in international climate leadership, which China and the European Union (EU) quickly sought to occupy. China, though still the largest emitter, took advantage of the U.S. absence by recommitting to the Paris targets and positioning itself as a renewable energy investment leader. At the same time, the EU stepped up its climate diplomacy, building coalitions with small island countries and vulnerable nations to maintain the agreement (Falkner, 2016). This pivot shows how decreasing U.S. investment in multilateral systems creates opportunities for competitors to redefine world agendas. "The lack of U.S. leadership has not derailed climate action but has instead redistributed influence to other actors," thus weakening America's position as a rule-maker in the liberal order (Falkner, 2016).

At home, the withdrawal intensified political polarization, with Republican leaders positioning climate action as contrary to economic growth and Democratic states such as California engaging in independent climate policies. This disintegration not only impeded national policy coherence but also presented the world with an image of U.S. unreliability. For example, the Biden administration's return to the Paris Agreement in 2021 was embraced internationally, but allies are still cautious about potential policy flip-flops, reflecting reduced confidence in U.S. commitments (Falkner, 2016). Such unpredictability undermines multilateral institutions' stability, as partners hedge against American uncertainty.

WHO Withdrawal: Undermining Global Health Governance

The Trump administration's withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrates the implications of stepping back from multilateralism. The WHO, a pillar of global health governance, facilitates international responses to disease outbreaks, establishes health standards, and assists developing countries in the development of healthcare infrastructure. The U.S., the WHO's traditional largest funder, supplied 15% of its budget and had important sway over its agenda. Nevertheless, the Trump administration blamed the WHO for handling the pandemic incorrectly and being lenient with China, employing withdrawal as leverage in an effort to pressure the agency for reforms.

This move severely hampered the global pandemic response. At the height of COVID-19, the WHO faced a funding shortfall of 1.3billion, delaying the distribution of vaccines and medical supplies to low income countries. The U.S. retreat also weakened its diplomatic leverage, as China stepped in to expand its influence through "mask diplomacy" and pledges of 1.3billion, delaying the distribution of vaccines and medical supplies to low income countries. By abdicating leadership, the U.S. allowed China to frame itself as a responsible global actor, contrasting sharply with American insularity.

The withdrawal also highlighted the domestic-international nexus of U.S. hegemony. Political polarization of pandemic measures e.g., mask mandates and vaccine hesitancy paralleled the unilateralism of American foreign policy. Although the Biden administration rolled back the WHO withdrawal in 2021, the incident permanently scarred America's image. Global health leaders now doubt the credibility of U.S. commitments, leading countries to diversify alliances with regional institutions like the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC). This decentralization of power undermines the coherence of the liberal order, as middle powers increasingly circumvent U.S.-led institutions.

Consequences for U.S. Hegemony and the Liberal Order

The withdrawal from multilateralism mirrors and accelerates the weakening of U.S. hegemony in three ways:

1. **Erosion of Soft Power:** U.S. soft power—based on its capacity to draw allies in through shared values and leadership—has weakened as it disavows multilateral commitments. For instance, the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement diminished America's reputation as a guarantor of international public goods, and the withdrawal from the WHO presented it as a crisis-unreliable partner. Increasing powers such as China leverage this deterioration by advancing alternative modes of governance (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative), which prioritize non-interference and economic pragmatism over democratic norms.
2. **Fragmentation of Collective Action:** Multilateral institutions operate on hegemonic backing in order to impose rules and coordinate action. American disengagement causes fragmentation of collective action, such as delayed climate targets and uneven vaccine allocation. This opens up space for authoritarian powers to influence agendas, such as China's "vaccine diplomacy" initiative in Latin America and Africa (Falkner, 2016).

3. Loss of Institutional Influence: Through the withdrawal from agreements, America gives up its seat at the table to allow competitors to remake rules. For example, China currently chairs four UN specialized agencies, up from none a decade ago, with greater authority over international norms in technology and trade.

America's withdrawal from multilateralism highlighted by the Paris Agreement and WHO withdrawals is a signal of a strategic mistake that accelerates its hegemonic decline. By valuing short-term unilateral benefits above long-term cooperation, the U.S. erodes the institutions that underpin its global leadership and the liberal order itself. As China and other powers move into leadership vacuums, the rules-based system comes to more closely mirror authoritarian preferences, undermining democratic values and collective security. To reverse this trend, domestic consensus on multilateral engagement must be rebuilt and diplomacy reinvested in. But in the time of polarization and strategic rivalry, the opportunity for restoring leadership is closing, making the fate of the liberal order uncertain.

II. Conclusion

The erosion of U.S. dominance is not an unexpected or single event but, instead, a long and multidimensional process unfolding along multiple axes i.e., economic, strategic, normative, and institutional. This dissertation has sought to explain this process through critical analysis of the ways in which shifts in international power dynamics are reconfiguring the international liberal order that America has led and maintained since the end of World War II.

The inquiry has confirmed that the decline of U.S. primacy is taking place concurrently with the ascendance of competitor powers particularly China and a transformation of global alignments. Nevertheless, this situation should not be interpreted as an absolute collapse of the liberal international order. Instead, what is unfolding is a divided and disputed global system wherein aspects of liberalism coexist alongside different models of governance and the projection of power. The persistence of international organizations, the plasticity of American foreign policy, and the growing role of regional actors are testaments to an adaptable and transitional period in international politics.

At the center of this change is the deliberate shift of U.S. attention from Europe to the Indo-Pacific as it seeks to contain China's ascendance and attain strategic predominance. In tandem, the decline of the normative legitimacy of the liberal order, especially in the Global South, is a result of mounting resentment of the postwar world order's inequalities. These trends pose not only questions regarding the future of U.S. leadership but also regarding the long-term viability of a single, Western-led world order in an increasingly plural world.

The conclusions of this thesis underscore that the global liberal order is neither completely disintegrating nor completely secure; rather, it is being redefined. The liberal principles of free markets, multilateralism, and democratic governance continue to define international relations, but they are now being challenged by competing visions promoted by rising powers and regional blocs. As the United States moves through a world in which its primacy is increasingly challenged, its capacity to assume a leadership role will increasingly rest on its ability to adapt, cooperate, and engage in multilateral institutions that advance the interests of a wider global community.

Here, the decline of U.S. hegemony should not be viewed as something entirely negative; instead, it should be viewed as an opportunity to construct a more equitable, diverse, and multipolar world order a one that is marked by a more balanced distribution of power and world governance more in accordance with contemporary geopolitical realities.

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