

Hegemonic Orders in an Anarchical Society: Conditions for Stability

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***Abstract:** Hegemonic orders can be stable if they fulfil two conditions. First, the hegemonic power must not pose a threat of domination or conquest for the other great powers. Second, the hegemonic order must dispense benefits to the participating states that are worth the attendant restrictions in their freedom of action. Even with the presence of these two conditions, the inherent tension between the imperatives of independence and order will continue to apply. States will disagree about the precise sharing of the burdens and the benefits of order. The weaker states will seek to tie the hegemonic power to the procedures of multilateral institutions that favour the many against the one, while the hegemonic power will be tempted to bypass such constraints. In the long run, even a stable hegemonic order will be threatened, if the distribution of power underpinning it changes. Eventually, new powers will grow more powerful than the status quo powers, and will seek to rearrange international order according to their interests and values.*

Keywords: international order, hegemony, balance of power, anarchical society

The purpose of this paper is to examine the inherent tension in the international system between the desire of its units to be independent on the one hand, and the need for international leadership to promote international order and facilitate institutionalised international cooperation on the other. The tension arises because order presupposes some degree of *de facto* subordination of the weaker to the leading powers, which conflicts with their desire for substantive independence. If the international system moves far in the direction of substantive independence between its units, it will be marked by disorder and strife. If the system moves far in the opposite direction of hegemony, the weaker units will be threatened with high degrees of domination or even conquest by the hegemonic power and are likely to resist.

This dilemma was resolved in the traditional European system through collective hegemony, whereby five or six great powers provided joint leadership for international order and cooperation. The balance of power kept any one of these great powers from dominating the others. This solution facilitated both order and independence to significant degree.

The post-Cold War distribution of power appears to conflict with the principle of the balance of power. Since the United States has acquired a hegemonic lead in material factors of power, the question arises whether a unipolar hegemonic order can be stable. The traditional balance of power approach would require the other great powers to coalesce against the hegemonic United States, which clearly has not happened thus far.

This paper will examine the conditions under which a hegemonic order can be stable. The arguments presented here draw heavily from the historical experience of the past few centuries, or even earlier. The apparent paradox of American hegemony without a balancing coalition of the other great powers will be explained in the light of previous experience, rather than by invoking some new factors unique to the present age.

Independence and order in an anarchical society

The international system can fruitfully be analysed as an anarchical society.¹ The absence of a government over the units, i.e. the states, points to its anarchical aspect. But it also has attributes of a society, such as common values and institutions that underpin international cooperation. International politics can thus be seen as moving between two poles: anarchy and societal order. The closer it is to the anarchical pole, the more insecurity and instability will prevail. When it moves closer to the societal order pole, international cooperation and stability will be more pronounced.

The international system is dynamic, i.e. it does not settle for long at some stable equilibrium point somewhere along the continuum from pure anarchy to pure order. On the contrary, historically it has oscillated between periods of pervasive conflict that approach the Hobbesian state of nature in which there is *bellum omnium contra omnes* (war of all against all) and periods of widespread order in which stability and international cooperation prevail. One reason for the oscillations that is well established in the literature is changes in the distribution of power. If a rising power overtakes the previous leading powers in factors of power, it will seek to rearrange the international system in its favour, while the status quo powers are likely to resist, resulting in what Robert Gilpin described as hegemonic wars, i.e. major system-wide power struggles. Once a new status quo emerges, international politics will settle into orderly patterns until some new challenger arises to threaten the new status quo.²

Another reason for these oscillations is the tension between the units' desire for independence and their need for international order. The desire for independence is reflected in the fact that humanity is divided into discrete political communities that have successfully established claims of sovereignty, i.e. which have overthrown or resisted any involuntary formal subordination to an external political factor. The cry "Give me liberty or give me death!" has resonated in many languages in the era of the nation state, and has precedents across the ages. The nation state remains by far the most legitimate political unit, able to demand the sacrifice of large numbers of its subjects when threatened in warfare. The drive for independence will be strong so long as the nation states command the primary political allegiance of the overwhelming majority of humans, i.e. so long as people's national identity is stronger than cosmopolitan political identities to the point that it justifies the supreme sacrifices of war for the sake of national independence and security.

In practice the independence, i.e. the freedom of action, of the states is circumscribed by all sorts of dependences between them that are promoted for the

¹ This approach is followed by the British School, and the seminal text is Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, London, Macmillan, 1977.

² Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1981.

sake of international order and cooperation. The point that needs to be emphasized is that international order requires international leadership, i.e. some degree of substantive subordination of weaker states to the leading power or powers. This has been established by Adam Watson in his magisterial *The Evolution of International Society*, which examines major cases of international societies across history from the origins of civilisation in ancient Mesopotamia to the post-Cold War period. As Watson states in his conclusion, the “gravitational pull towards hegemony, and the ubiquity of some hegemonial authority in societies of independent or quasi-independent states, stands out so clearly from the evidence that the question arises why studies of states systems and political theory underestimate or even ignore it”.³

States are apt to compromise some of their substantive independence for the sake of the security provided within a hegemonic alliance, the prosperity facilitated by a hegemonic international economic system and other benefits of international order. But at the same time they will seek to keep as much of their freedom of action as possible. If the hegemonic power pushes too far in the direction of hegemony, the weaker states are apt to pull in the opposite direction. When they are threatened with conquest and direct imperial rule, they are apt to resist through anti-hegemonic warfare. On the other hand, if the international system moves too far in the other direction of disorder and insecurity, the weaker states will be more willing to give up some of their freedom of action for the sake of protection in a hegemonic sphere. The violence and instability of the Napoleonic Wars was followed by the collective hegemony of the Concert of Europe, and the Second World War by the formation of NATO.

A hegemonic order will be more stable if it is perceived as legitimate. As Watson’s survey demonstrates, some international societies in the past were much more hegemonic than others. Rome, Byzantium and China, for example, constituted the imperial cores of international societies, the weaker members of which formally accepted their inferiority and dependence on the imperial center, though without thereby relinquishing all or even much of their freedom of action. Classical Greece on the other hand was marked by a strong anti-hegemonic legitimacy: a series of

³ Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 314.

hegemonic powers were eventually brought down by anti-hegemonic coalitions that fought in the name of the liberties of the Greek city-states.

The modern society of sovereign states that have evolved in Europe since the Renaissance is also based on a strong anti-hegemonic legitimacy, much like the classical Greek. The main landmarks of its institutional development are a series of system-wide treaties that were agreed upon at the end of major anti-hegemonic conflicts (Westphalia in 1648, Utrecht in 1714, Vienna in 1815, Versailles in 1919, the UN Charter in 1945 and, arguably, the Charter of Paris in 1990.⁴) International law is based on the notion that all sovereign states are formally equal and respect each other's sovereignty – even though in Krasner's terms this amounts to “organised hypocrisy”.⁵

The force of the anti-hegemonic orientation in the society of sovereign states is evident by the centrality of the principle of the balance of power in both its practices and its theoretical conceptualisation. Indeed, the balance of power has been seen as fundamental to the system of sovereign states, the precondition for its very existence. If the most powerful state is able to conquer the other great powers, it will be able to conquer all states and replace the society of sovereign states with a world empire. Consequently, for their very survival, the sovereign states will coalesce in order to counter-balance a power that grows so much as to threaten to conquer them. It has therefore long been argued that state behaviour will produce a balance of power, whether by conscious design or not. As early as 1605, Botero argued that “given the plurality of princes it follows that a balance of power is useful and good not as a result of volition, but circumstances”⁶, a point established with greater scientific rigour by Kenneth Waltz in our days.⁷ Hedley Bull, who analyzed international

⁴ Philip Bobbit places the Charter of Paris in 1990 in the series of major treaties marking the main turning points in the development of modern international society. See Philip Bobbit, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*, London, Penguin, 2002, Book II, Part II.

⁵ Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*, Princeton U.P., 1999.

⁶ As cited in Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations since Machiavelli*, Yale U.P., 2002, p. 94.

⁷ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading (Massach.), Addison-Wesley, 1979.

politics from the point of view of the society of sovereign states, maintained that the balance of power is society's most central institution.⁸ The insistence on a balance of power is echoed today by the calls of French leaders for the restoration of multipolarity in international politics.⁹

While the society of sovereign states has historically resisted any bid by one power to dominate it, it did require some forms of hegemonic authority to provide order. Three kinds of hegemonic authority need to be emphasized. First, there was the collective leadership exercised by the great powers to promote system-wide order, such as when they put forth the landmark treaties mentioned above. In the eighteenth century, an era of power politics and shifting alliances that may give the impression of weak great power cooperation, Voltaire described Europe as “une *espece de grande republique*” (a kind of great commonwealth)¹⁰, an assessment echoed by the historian Edward Gibbon and the international law theorist Vattel, indicating the degree of order provided in common by the great powers in spite of their frequent conflicts. In the nineteenth century, the Concert of Europe was formally a system of collective hegemony, as is the UN Security Council in regard to the enhanced powers of its permanent members. In its various forms, collective hegemony provided system-wide order without violating the principle of the balance of power.

Second, great powers have established spheres of influence, providing hegemonic order to a sub-set of units within the society of sovereign states. The division of Europe and other parts of the world into two rival alliances during the Cold War is a prominent example. Such hegemonic spheres have been stable whenever they were compatible with the overall balance of power. But historically, if one power threatened to acquire so large a sphere of influence as to increase its power to the point of threatening to overthrow the balance of power, it was resisted.

Third, there have been examples of unipolar hegemonic authority exercised in specific issue areas in ways that did not threaten to result in the domination of other powers, i.e. that did not threaten to overthrow the balance of power. One instance

⁸ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, London, Macmillan, 1977.

⁹ *Economist*, December 24, 2005.

¹⁰ Cited in Watson, *Evolution*, p. 206.

was Britain's unilateral use of its naval mastery in the first half of the nineteenth century to abolish the slave trade in the seas and oceans.¹¹ Another example was the open international economic system promoted by Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the British economy was producing half the industrial product of the globe.¹² It is true that the open international economic system was in Britain's national interest, since it created asymmetric economic dependences with her weaker trading partners. Nonetheless, it did not threaten them with Napoleonic-type domination and it did secure for them over the long run economic growth and prosperity.

One can conclude from these cases, that the exercise of hegemony in the society of sovereign states has been unacceptable only if it is incompatible with the balance of power. While the sovereign states are loath to surrender their freedom of action, they may be willing to do so to some degree for the benefits of order offered by the leading powers, so long as they are not threatened with domination and conquest.

The role of ideology

The establishment of a hegemonic order is facilitated by ideological homogeneity. International order involves at least to some extent the projection of domestic values at the international level. Units with the same domestic value systems are more likely to agree on the values-content of an international order and thus to form a consensus in support of the hegemonic power. This factor creates an imperative for great powers to spread their ideology internationally, in order to increase the number of units that share their values and support their conception of order. Unsurprisingly, cases of great powers striving to export their ideology can be found across history.

Nonetheless, this apparently straightforward point needs to be qualified in two important ways. First, the imperatives of the balance of power have time and again

¹¹ Krasner, *Sovereignty*, pp. 106-8.

¹² Stephen Krasner, "State Power and the Structure of International Trade", *World Politics*, Vol.

trumped the imperatives of ideology. Cardinal Richelieu led Catholic France into the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) on the side of the Protestant powers of Germany and the Netherlands in order to prevent the Catholic Hapsburgs from becoming so powerful as to threaten to conquer France herself. In the later nineteenth century, republican France, the most democratic great power of Europe, formed an alliance with tsarist Russia, the most absolutist great power, against the Second German Reich, which ideologically was in between. In the 1970s, Mao's China moved close to the United States in order to balance Soviet power, in spite of the ideological affinity of the Chinese and the Soviet regimes. These examples suggest that ideological affinity has historically been insufficient for the establishment of a hegemonic order, if the hegemonic power threatened to dominate and conquer other great powers.

Second, attempts by great powers to export their ideology have at times resulted not in hegemonic order but in major ideological conflicts and disorder.¹³ States are more likely to accept hegemonic constraints on their external policies (e.g. membership in an alliance) than changes in their domestic structures, which constitute a much heavier degree of hegemony. Indeed, the sovereign states system that arose in the wake of the early modern European religious wars was designed to end the efforts of each side in the religious divide to export its ideology to the other side. Mutual respect of sovereignty meant non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states. This feature of the sovereign states system facilitated its global spread in the 19th and 20th centuries. If Protestant and Catholic states in early modern Europe could coexist by *formally* respecting each other's sovereignty (in practice of course powerful states always intervened in the internal affairs of weaker states), so for example could Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Confucian states, or during the Cold War Liberal and Communist states. Forceful attempts to promote ideological homogenisation go against this major feature of the sovereign states system and have at times been

¹³ This point is emphasized by Martin Wight in his analysis of the Revolutionist tradition in international politics. See Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, Leicester U.P., 1994.

resisted fiercely (for example during the religious wars, the wars of the French Revolution, WWII and the Cold War).

The distribution of power in the early twenty-first century

In terms of material factors of power, the United States has established since the collapse of the Soviet Union a commanding lead over the other great powers. What is more striking is that this lead has been growing. This is evident by GDP data, the most commonly used indicator of economic power. Japan, the world's second economy, had been closing the gap with the United States during most of the post-war period. But since the 1990s it has been falling behind.

Table 1: Japan's GDP as a percentage of American GDP¹⁴

1950	1980	1994	2003
8%	45%	69%	39,7%

The same is the case in regard to Germany, the world's third economy, as Table 2 shows. The other great powers shown on Table 2 have GDPs below one fifth of the American and thus remain too far behind to be able to challenge the American primacy soon. It should be emphasized that such GDP comparisons are not highly accurate measures of relative economic power and should be treated with caution. Nonetheless they do provide a rough indicator of trends in the international distribution of power. What they show clearly is that recent Japanese and German economic stagnation in conjunction with robust American economic growth have enhanced the overall global lead of the United States.

¹⁴ The percentages in Table 1 were calculated on the basis of comparable GDP at current USD data for 1950 and 1980 in Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York, Random House, 1987, pp. 369 and 436, for 1994 in *Historical Statistics, 1960-1994*, Statistics Directorate, OECD, 1996, p. 14, and for 2003 in *World Development Indicators database*, World Bank, September 2004.

Table 2: Great powers' GDP as a percentage of American GDP¹⁵

	Japan	Germany	Britain	France	China	Russia
1998	51.8%	27.8%	15.9%	18,6%	14,9%	4,2%
2004	39.6%	23.3%	18.4%	17.2%	14.2%	5.0%

American superiority over the other great powers is even greater in terms of military power. Clearly the United States occupies an increasingly hegemonic position in the present distribution of power. According to the theory and the past practice of the balance of power, one would expect some or all of the other great powers to coalesce against the United States (external balancing) and to raise their own strength, especially military power (internal balancing). Yet this has not happened.

It should be emphasized that there is international discontent with American hegemony. As has always been the case, weaker actors are loath to accept diminished freedom of action, even while they enjoy the benefits of hegemonic order. In the present case their discontent is manifested in what the German publisher Josef Joffe has described as “psycho-cultural balancing”, which in effect means a rise in anti-American sentiments, as well “political-diplomatic balancing”, which means an attempt by the weaker actors to tie down the hegemonic power through the multilateral procedures of international regimes. As Joffe argues, “hegemonic powers are loath to submit to international regimes they do not dominate. Lesser powers like them precisely because they strengthen the many against the one. In a world that does not (yet) gang up formally against the ‘last remaining superpower’, international regimes have become the functional equivalent of classical balance-of-power politics.”¹⁶

¹⁵ The percentages were calculated on the basis of GDP in current USD data. The source for the 1998 data is *World Bank Atlas 2000*, Washington, D.C, April 2000, and for the 2004 data *World Development Indicators Database*, World Bank, Washington, D.C, February 2006.

¹⁶ Josef Joffe, “Defying History and Theory: The United States as the ‘Last Remaining Superpower’”, in John Ikenberry (editor), *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2002, pp. 172-6.

Nonetheless, this does not amount to genuine balancing in the traditional balance-of-power sense. This is seen most clearly by an examination of relative defence spending.

Table 3: Great powers' defense spending as a percentage of American defence spending¹⁷

	Japan	Britain	France	Germany	Russia	China
1994	13,1%	12,0%	11,2%	9,0%	4,7%	4,0%
2003	11,2%	8,9%	8,4%	6,5%	3,1%	7,9%

As Table 3 shows, the other great powers except China have been *reducing* their defence spending relative to that of the United States. This fact provides concrete and incontrovertible proof that the other great powers do not feel militarily threatened by American hegemony. If they felt insecure, they would be expected to engage in internal balancing, i.e. to strive to increase their military capabilities relative to those of the United States. Instead, they commit lower percentages of their GDPs to defense than the United States, and the trend is downward. The other great powers have not engaged in external balancing either, given that most remain formally allied to the United States. By way of contrast, the rise of Germany in the later nineteenth century had sparked a major armaments race, as well as the formation of an anti-German coalition (*entente*). What must now be examined are the causes of the apparent current suspension in the operation of the balance of power and whether they are likely to sustain a stable hegemonic order.

Conditions for stability of the American hegemonic order

One prominent line of argument in the literature suggests that the absence of an anti-American coalition is explained by the strong bonds between the liberal democracies, which include most current great powers. Ikenberry has argued that Western post-war institutions have mitigated the security dilemmas of anarchy and

¹⁷ The percentages were calculated on the basis of data for defence spending, in constant 2000 dollars and exchange rates, in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), military expenditure database, http://www.sipri.org/contents/milap/milex/mex_database1.html, accessed in February 2005.

hence have made balancing unnecessary within the West.¹⁸ Risse has made a similar point, arguing that the West constitutes a stable Liberal security community.¹⁹ Doyle, Russett and others have argued that, quite apart from the effect of Western international institutions, democracies on account of their domestic structures do not fight wars with one another and hence do not face the traditional security dilemmas among themselves.²⁰

These arguments certainly describe the current relations among the democratic great powers better than traditional balance of power theory. Moreover, they are supported by earlier historical evidence that hegemonic orders are more acceptable within groups of states with similar ideologies. Note that China, the only unambiguously non-democratic great power, is also the one that has been increasing its military spending in relation to that of the United States (Table 3). Nonetheless, it is difficult to accept that democracies will never ever face security dilemmas among themselves. The democratic peace argument as refined most recently applies only to mature democracies²¹, i.e. mainly the West since 1945, which throughout the Cold War was tightly aligned in the face of the Soviet threat. The sixteen years since the end of the Cold War are simply not enough as empirical evidence to suggest that the security dilemmas that were present in all previous history have disappeared forever among democracies. Similarly, Western Cold War institutions may be said by their

¹⁸ John Ikenberry, "Democracy, Institutions, and American Restraint", in John Ikenberry (editor), *America Unrivalled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2002.

¹⁹ Thomas Risse, "U.S. Power in a Liberal Security Community", in John Ikenberry (editor), *America Unrivalled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2002.

²⁰ Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Parts I and II", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no.3 (summer 1983) and no.4 (autumn 1983). Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1993.

²¹ New democracies are often belligerent, according to Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005. But the authors state in the very first sentence of this work that no mature democracy has ever fought a war with another.

momentum still to alleviate the security dilemmas within the West, but it is hard to accept that they have fundamentally changed the very nature of international politics.

From the perspective of the arguments presented in this paper one can say that the presence of democracy in most great powers is a factor that facilitates acceptance of the American hegemonic order, but is insufficient for explaining why there is no balancing against American superiority in factors of power. The democracies tend to agree on the values-content of international order and, unlike non-democratic states, they are not afraid that the hegemonic power will attempt forcefully to change their domestic structures. But some other explanation is needed to show why they do not fear that they may be dominated or conquered, given the commanding American lead in the distribution of power, and given that the imperatives of the balance of power have in the past trumped the imperatives of ideology.

The same can be said about economic interdependence as an integrating factor facilitating the American hegemonic order. The establishment of the post-war open international economic system by the United States benefited enormously all states that participated, which have witnessed unparalleled growth and prosperity. Its manifest superiority to the bleak performance of the Soviet Union's economic order in its hegemonic sphere was a leading factor in the collapse of the Soviet system. Russia and even China, which resists democratisation, are now participating in the open international economic system to partake of its economic benefits. Thus it constitutes an even broader positive inducement than shared democratic values for accepting the American hegemonic order. Still, economic interdependence on its own is insufficient in overcoming the traditional security dilemmas; high degrees of interdependence in Europe before 1914 did not prevent the formation of two rival coalitions and the outbreak of WWI.

Another argument in the literature points to nuclear deterrence as the reason why the traditional security dilemmas are mitigated among the nuclear great powers. This argument is theoretically very plausible; the cost of conquering a nuclear power is likely to be prohibitive.²² Still, this did not prevent the nuclear-armed United States, Britain, France and China from feeling threatened by Soviet conventional

forces superiority during the Cold War, which led them to an anti-Soviet alignment. Clearly the United States today does not evoke similar threat perceptions in the other great powers.

A more persuasive argument for the absence of great power threat perceptions in the face of American hegemony focuses on geographical factors such as distance and the oceans that separate the United States from the other great powers. John Mearsheimer has argued that it is almost prohibitively difficult for a great power to project military force over seas and oceans against other great powers. This point is borne by European history: conquerors such as Napoleon and Hitler were unable to invade Britain, while the British were unable to conquer and annex Continental European territories. The United States was one of the most expansionist powers in the world during the nineteenth century, when it expanded from the original thirteen colonies all the way to the Pacific. But its expansion was in its own hemisphere; it could not expand territorially in the Eastern hemisphere.²³

Mearsheimer's argument has the merit that it introduces the geographical factor to the abstract reasoning of balance of power theory. Anti-hegemonic coalitions have arisen historically whenever the great powers perceived that the hegemonic power threatened to dominate or conquer them. Such threat perceptions derive not only from the hegemon's superiority in factors of power; they also depend on whether geography facilitates or hinders the use of hegemonic power for the domination and conquest of the other great powers. In the past there never emerged among the great powers an anti-British coalition, even at the height of British power, since it would have been virtually impossible for Britain to conquer and annex Continental European territories at the expense of the other great powers. The same applies today for the United States. If one of the land powers of the Eastern hemisphere enjoyed the kind

²² John Ikenberry, "Conclusion", in John Ikenberry (editor), *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2002, p.290.

²³ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2001, pp. 83-136 and 380-83. The distance factor has also been emphasized by Stephen Walt and William Wohlforth. See William Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World", in John Ikenberry (editor), *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2002, p. 106-8.

of superiority in economic and military power that the United States has today, it would be perceived as much more threatening by the other great powers – as happened with Germany in the first half of the twentieth century and the Soviet Union in the second.

The absence of threat perceptions by the great powers in the face of American hegemony can also be accounted for by less fixed factors, such as the structure of the US armed forces. The land forces of the United States in particular have shrunk drastically since the end of the Cold War. They are suitable for limited interventions in peripheral regions, rather than for a major war against one of the great powers. The United States can project military force across the oceans against small powers such as the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. But the fact that the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have already stretched the American land forces very thin suggests the severe limits to such trans-oceanic operations. Thus the present American force structure does not pose a conventional military threat for the other great powers, unlike the Red Army during the Cold War.

An additional factor accounting for the absence of an anti-American coalition is the actual or latent threat perceptions among the great powers of the Eastern hemisphere, especially Asia. Due to their geographical proximity and the resultant history of wars between them, they fear potential threats from each other more than they fear the United States. In spite of European integration, Britain and France jealously guard key national prerogatives such as nuclear weapons and the veto power in the Security Council, which prevent them from being overshadowed by an economically and demographically more formidable reunited Germany. Russia, China, Japan and India constitute an Asian balance of power subsystem quite similar to that of Europe in the nineteenth century; they eye each other suspiciously.²⁴ The American hegemonic order actually alleviates the security dilemmas within the Eastern hemisphere by making potential security threats among its great powers less likely to materialize, given that the United States is likely, acting as an offshore balancer, to weigh in against any aggressor.

²⁴ For the Asian balance of power subsystem, see Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2001, pp. 173-261.

Consequently, one can say that the American hegemonic system has been stable thus far because of the combination of positive inducements on the one hand and an absence of great power threat perceptions on the other. The latter is a *conditio sine qua non*, as previous experience with hegemonic orders has shown. The distance of the oceans, in conjunction with the current American force structure, make the United States less threatening to the great powers of the Eastern hemisphere than Germany or the Soviet Union in the past. The democratic great powers are therefore willing to give up some of their freedom of action, especially in the context of Western institutions originating in the Cold War era, for the sake of promoting a liberal democratic international order under American leadership. Even non-democratic or quasi-democratic great powers – China and Russia respectively – accept American leadership for the sake of the benefits of the open international economic system that the United States set up after 1945, so long as the United States does not attempt forcefully to change their domestic systems. As has always been the case, there is discontent among the weaker actors with the hegemonic power, manifesting itself through anti-Americanism and soft balancing in the context of multilateral institutions. But there is no real balancing such as could undermine the American hegemonic order. So long as the other great powers do not feel militarily threatened by the United States, they are willing to draw the benefits of the American hegemonic order even at the cost of some diminution in their freedom of action.

In the long run this fortunate arrangement may contain the seeds of its own destruction. The open international economic system is highly dynamic. By virtue of the mechanism of uneven growth, it alters the distribution of power over time. In earlier post-war decades it facilitated the rise of the German and the Japanese economies, which in the 1970s became serious rivals to the American economy. Still, Germany and Japan were dwarfed by the United States in terms of size and population. Eventually, their rapidly growing economies reached a stage of maturity and lost steam, leaving them far behind American GDP.

The situation will be different if China and India follow a similar sustained rapid-growth path. Both nations have populations of over a billion; China has a larger territory than the United States. Their economies are now among the fastest growing in the world. Even if they eventually reach a stage of maturity and lose steam, they will need less than half the per capita GDP of the United States in order to have

overtaken it in total GDP. If that happens, they may seek to rearrange international order according to their interests and values, which the declining United States, perhaps in alliance with other Western powers, may seek to resist, ushering in an era of heightened international friction and strife. In the past, such transitions usually entailed system-wide warfare. We may not face such a transition for decades, but when we do, managing it without warfare or Cold-War style strife will be a much greater challenge than managing a hegemonic order under a stable distribution of power.

Conclusions

Hegemonic orders can be stable if they fulfil two conditions. First, the hegemonic power must not pose a threat of domination or conquest for the other great powers. Throughout history powers valued their freedom of action, and this is particularly the case in the modern society of sovereign states, which like the classical Greek society of city-states is based on a strong anti-hegemonic legitimacy. The great powers will be willing to submit to hegemonic authority only to some degree; they will form balancing coalitions against a hegemonic power that threatens to subjugate them to the extent of changing their domestic structures or taking away all their freedom of action. The present American hegemonic order fulfils this condition of stability, as is evident from the declining great power defence spending relative to that of the United States, which demonstrates that they do not feel militarily threatened by the hegemonic power.

Second, the hegemonic order must dispense benefits to the participating states that are worth the attendant restrictions in their freedom of action. The present American hegemonic order is most beneficial to democratic states, since it largely reflects American domestic values. But it also provides economic benefits to non-democratic participants such as China, as well as overall peace and security among the great powers.

Even with the presence of these two conditions, the inherent tension between the imperatives of independence and order will continue to apply. States will disagree

about the precise sharing of the burdens and the benefits of order. The weaker states will seek to tie the hegemonic power to the procedures of multilateral institutions that favour the many against the one, while the hegemonic power will be tempted to bypass such constraints. But the fulfilment of these two conditions makes the management of such inherent tensions feasible.

In the long run, even a stable hegemonic order will be threatened, if the distribution of power underpinning it changes. Eventually new powers will grow more powerful than the status quo powers and will seek to rearrange international order according to their interests and values. Historically such transition periods were marked by system-wide warfare. Managing such a transition in the future without warfare or dangerous levels of strife will be a challenge much more formidable than maintaining order under a stable distribution of power.