## ISP Policy Forum: Hard and Soft Power in East-West Relations

# American Hegemony and the Future of East-West Relations

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This brief essay sketches a view of international politics as a realm of variegated hierarchy and highlights the importance of authority in the conduct of hegemonic foreign policies. After developing a conception of hierarchy in international relations, the framework is applied to the future East–West relations. Conflict with rising powers, especially China, is not foreordained, but is a function in part of the policy choices made by the United States. In the long run, China will overtake the United States in some aggregate measures of international power. If current trends continue, and the United States attempts to counter this challenge on its own, it will slowly but inexorably lose its supremacy. On the other hand, by building authority, the United States can, at a minimum, face a future Chinese superpower with strong subordinates who benefit from its leadership. At a maximum, it might even succeed in locking China into an American-dominated international order.

**Keywords:** hierarchy, authority, power, United States, China

In 2002, the United States made a highly visible effort to get approval from the United Nations Security Council for its plan to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq. The United States did not turn to the international community for assistance, although that no doubt would have been welcome. As the war later demonstrated, the United States had the ability to topple the Iraqi government on its own. Rather, the United States turned to the United Nations to support its claim that it had the *authority* to wage a preventive war on a sovereign state that it deemed a threat to its security. In essence, the United States was asking other states to approve and thereby *legitimate* regime change. It was precisely this assertion of authority that the other permanent members of the Security Council, with the exception of Great Britain, and a majority of the other members could not support. This same struggle continues into the postwar era. As difficult as it is for Washington to "forgive and forget" the opposition of its usual allies, its formerly stalwart partners fear that any participation in the reconstruction will still serve to legitimate ex post the bold new right asserted by the United States.

The struggle at the United Nations was misperceived by participants and observers alike because of the blinders that we nearly all wear. The concepts of authority and legitimacy that were implicit in the debate are alien to current ways of thinking about and understanding international politics. The primary assumption of international relations is that the system is anarchic, a political realm devoid of authority. In this brief essay, I sketch a view of international politics as a

realm of variegated hierarchy and highlight the importance of authority in the conduct of hegemonic foreign policies. In making this argument, I focus less on "hard power" than others (Mearsheimer 2001) and go beyond the "soft power" of American values and cultures espoused by many liberals (Nye 2002). Instead, I emphasize the importance and effects of authority in international relations.

I conclude with a discussion of how future East–West relations may evolve differently if the United States invests in and maintains its authority over others. I argue that conflict with rising powers, especially China, is not foreordained, but is a function in part of the policy choices made by the United States. In the long run, as best we can predict today, China will overtake the United States in some aggregate measures of international power, especially GDP and population (Kugler, this symposium). If current trends continue, and the United States attempts to counter this challenge on its own, it will slowly but inexorably lose its supremacy. On the other hand, by building authority the United States can, at a minimum, face a future Chinese superpower with strong subordinates who benefit from its leadership. At a maximum, it might even succeed in locking China into an American-dominated international order. But key to maintaining a state's hierarchy over others is credibly committing not to exploit this authority. It is on this score that the present "assertive unilateralism" of President George W. Bush is most worrisome over the long term.

### **Power and Authority**

There are many different forms of power. Robert Dahl (1957) classically defined this elusive concept as A's ability to get B to do something that he or she would not otherwise do. Coercion, defined as the linking of material threats or rewards to behavior, is but one form of power—even though it is typically the only form analyzed in international relations. "Hard power" indicators—demography, GDP, military spending—are taken by many scholars to be reflections of a state's ability to coerce others.

Authority is a second and, in international relations, a neglected form of power. In an authority relationship, A wills B to follow, and B voluntarily complies. As with all power, A still gets B to do something he or she would otherwise not do, but B complies because A's commands are understood to be obligatory and legitimate. By analogy, a mugger coerces you to choose between your money and your life, and a government obligates you to pay taxes and possesses the right to punish you for failing to do so. Both are forms of power that cause you to empty your wallet of money that you would otherwise prefer to ratain, but the latter's demand is understood to be legitimate, whereas the former's is not.

International relationists assume, rightly, that the international system as a whole is anarchic, or lacking in a single, overarching authority (Waltz 1959, 1979). In the absence of a single world government, this is a truism. But it is a fallacy of division, albeit one commonly made, to assume that because the system is anarchic all relationships within that system are anarchic as well. Relations between states can be and often are authoritative.<sup>2</sup>

International relationists err by assuming that authority derives only from formal-legal institutions.<sup>3</sup> Even excluding religious, ideological, or other forms of authority, political authority has multiple sources. Formal-legal authority is conferred

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Scheppele and Soltan (1987) cite this as the canonical definition.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>In other work, I have addressed the origins and consequences of hierarchical relationships in the world system at greater length (Lake 1996, 1999, 2001, 2004). For related but alternative conceptions of hierarchy, see Clark (1989), Wendt and Friedheim (1995), Tammen et al. (2000), and the literature on hegemonic stability theory cited below.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>On how this formal-legal conception was imported into international relations theory, see Schmidt (1998).

on rulers by prior lawful institutions, and because there is no institution to confer authority on particular actors within the international system, a formal-legal approach implies that the system must be anarchic. Yet, in contractual theories of the state (see North 1981; Levi 1988), in the anthropological literature on emergent societies (see Earle 1997; Diehl 2000), and in sociology more generally (Mann 1986), authority is also understood to emerge from "practice" based on an exchange of public goods and services by the ruler for compliance and obligation by the ruled. In equilibrium, the ruler, or A, provides a social order of sufficient value to the ruled, or B, to earn their compliance to the extractions necessary to the provision of that order. Such authorities of practice can exist not only within but also between states, with one state providing an international order of value to others to earn their consent to its authority. Dominant states provide order and, in turn, make demands on other states; subordinate states benefit from the order and regard the commands of the dominant state necessary for that order as legitimate and, therefore, authoritative (Lake 2004). Key is that both the dominant and subordinate states understand that the dominant state has the right to make certain demands, rooted in its "special responsibilities" for social order, and the subordinate state has an obligation to comply with those demands if made.

Hierarchy exists when one actor possesses authority over a second. Authority is never total, of course, but varies in extent. A may possess authority over B and issue commands regulating possible actions 1–5 but not on actions 6–n, which remain "private" to B or beyond A's ability to expect compliance. In other words, B may recognize the legitimacy of A's commands regulating its security relations with third parties (A commands B not to ally with others), but not that of any commands she may or may not issue on security cooperation with itself (A commands B to join her in a war). In this case, a partial hierarchy exists. Hierarchy increases with the number of B's actions A can legitimately regulate. If A previously possessed authority over actions 1–5 and now exerts authority over issues 1–8, for instance, her hierarchy over B has increased; to continue the example, if A now gains the authority to command B to assist it in a conflict, A's hierarchy over B has expanded.

So defined, hierarchy is a continuous variable that varies by the number of actions over which A can legitimately issue commands and expect compliance by B (see Lake 1996, 1999). At one extreme, A possesses no authority over any action B might perform. This is the ideal of "Westphalian sovereignity" and the condition of anarchy that is commonly (but mistakenly) thought to characterize all relationships within the international system (Krasner 1999). At the other extreme, A possesses the authority to regulate all actions B might perform. In this extreme of complete or pure hierarchy, B possesses no independent rights or autonomous ability to decide anything and is subservient to A in all aspects of social life. In international relations, the most hierarchical relationships take on the form of empires, where B is entirely subordinate to A in a broad range of economic and security actions. Dominant states that wield *partial* authority over *multiple* subordinates have traditionally been referred to as hegemons—and the social orders they create as "hegemonies." For reasons of space and relevance to the topic of this symposium, I focus specifically on hegemony in the rest of this essay.

### **Authority in Practice**

The United States has historically invested in authority and used it effectively to manage its relations with other states, establishing regional hegemonies over Latin

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>The literature on hegemonic stability theory is large. For a review, see Lake (1993). Most definitions of hegemony emphasize material capabilities; see Krasner (1976), Keohane (1984:31–41), and Lake (1988:29–44). Gilpin is more sensitive to the issues of authority and legitimacy developed here, but still sees relations between states as anarchic; see Gilpin (1975, 1977, 1981).

America in the late nineteenth century and the so-called West (including North-east Asia) after 1945. It attempted, with some measure of success, to extend its hegemony over the broader international system after 1990. These relationships between a dominant United States and subordinate others rested not just or even proportionately on coercive capabilities but on authority. United States hegemony was seen as both largely binding on others and legitimate.

The product of more than 100 years of conscious strategy, highlighted in the famous Monroe Doctrine issued in 1823, by the late nineteenth century, the United States had built a regional hegemony that included nearly every country in its hemisphere. Between 1898 and 1934, the United States intervened militarily in Caribbean states more than 30 times to regulate their internal affairs (Smith 1996:52–53). In the case of the Dominican Republic in 1904, for instance, looming debt and fear of European collectors led President Theodore Roosevelt to proclaim his so-called corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, through which he asserted that the United States possessed broad authority over the domestic and international affairs of states within the hemisphere. As Roosevelt declared in a startlingly blunt claim to authority, "Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a generally loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power..." (quoted in LaFeber 1994:247). Even after President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ended a generation of interventions into the domestic and foreign affairs of his country's southern neighbors, and claimed to be building a new relationship of political equality, the fact of American hegemony remained—and was manifested again in a series of military interventions in Central America in the mid-1980s, in Panama in 1989, and in Haiti in 1994. As the United States opposition to the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua showed most clearly, countries in the hemisphere—and especially in Central America—are still not free to select any government they might choose or to even consider economic or political orientations opposed by the United States. Continuing economic sanctions on Cuba and American support for the coup against Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez are evidence of the punishments imposed on those who would defy the authority of the United States in the region.

The United States later extended its hegemony beyond the Western hemisphere to Europe and Northeast Asia. As in North and South America, after World War II, many countries in these two regions became subordinate to the United States in either security or economic relations—and frequently in both. Perhaps reflecting the importance it attached to controlling the economic and security policies of its "allies" in the Cold War, the United States established an infrastructure of bases, troops, and exclusive alliances that not only effectively deterred the Russians but also limited the foreign policy autonomy and potential for opportunism by its subordinates (Lake 1999:Ch. 5). Likewise, the United States used its relative prosperity during and after World War II to assert new economic dominance over its prior great power rivals. Partly by plan, and partly because of an unexpected dollar shortage after the war, the Bretton Woods monetary institutions created a de facto exchange rate regime in which most countries (directly or indirectly) fixed their currencies to the dollar, giving Washington unprecedented leverage over and responsibility for the international monetary system and, more important, the mon-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>For a similar argument and cases of order building in international relations, see Ikenberry (2001). Although focusing on "constitutional orders," Ikenberry does not develop the idea of international authority or link it to variations in hierarchy within the international system.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>Among the better empirical descriptions of American hegemony are Calleo and Rowland (1973) and Gilpin (2001).

etary policies of other countries.<sup>7</sup> The United States also insisted that its new subordinates end their systems of imperial preference and liberalize their trade. Combined with the strength of the American economy, this led to a radical reorientation of trade flows and created a new trade dependence upon the United States (see Gilpin 2001). By the late 1950s, American hegemony was firmly ensconced over both Western Europe and Northeast Asia.

By setting the rules for its subordinates and mobilizing them for its global struggles, these authority networks have at every stage served as "force multipliers" for the United States. While accepting a measure of responsibility for defending its hemisphere, the United States did not need to worry about the rise of enemies or hostile alliances on its own borders. And although carrying a disproportionate burden for the collective defense, the United States nonetheless benefited from the contributions of its subordinates, from secure regions from which it would carry out a forward-based defense, and from a liberal economic system that tied its allies more deeply into its sphere. Most importantly, just as with Latin America, the United States did not need to worry about enemies or hostile alliances arising from within the Western system.

In the 1990s, the United States accepted new responsibilities for a "New World Order" that would defend national borders against violent change (Kuwait) and quell violence in failed and abusive states (Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo) in exchange for expanding American hegemony both East and West.<sup>8</sup> The aspiration was to build a global social order with the United States at its center. As with its past regional hegemonies, the United States would accept broad responsibilities for peace and stability, and others would accept a measure of subordination as the price of social order.<sup>9</sup>

Progressive internationalists, prominent in the early years of the administration of President Bill Clinton, supported this aim and favored a strategy of what Secretary of State Madeline Albright termed "assertive multilateralism." This was really a continuation of the strategy begun by President George H. W. Bush, who began the quest for the new world order by working through the United Nations in the 1991 Iraq War. This strategy was remarkably successful not necessarily in building an international social order but in creating legitimacy for American actions taken in pursuit of that order. Central to any hierarchy is the dominant state's ability to credibly commit not to abuse the authority conferred upon it by subordinates. Multilateralism is an effective means of binding the policies of the dominant state to the preferences of the international community. By agreeing to work through institutions that have the potential to block certain policies—or at the very least, to fail to approve policies—the dominant state signals its commitment to "moderate" ends supported by key member states of that organization (Lake 1999:231–245; Thompson 2006). Every major use of force by the United States from 1989 (Panama invasion) to 2003 (Iraq War) was approved by some international organization, codifying the legitimacy of American actions in the eyes of the international community.

Neoconservatives who dominated the first administration of President George W. Bush do not differ in the goal of creating an American-centered international order, but have adopted a very different strategy that we might call "assertive unilateralism." Wanting to demonstrate the usefulness of American power, and frustrated

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>On monetary hierarchies, see Cohen (1998).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>On the origins of the New World Order, see Bush and Scowcroft (1998). For a critique, see Tucker and Hendrickson (1992).

 $<sup>^9\</sup>mathrm{In}$  support of an American "empire," see Ferguson (2004) and Lal (2004).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Progressive internationalism is well summarized in Steinbruner (2000). For a discussion of key issues in both assertive multilateralism and unilateralism, see Brzezinski (2004).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>The foreign policy of President George W. Bush has generated a number of important studies, including Daalder and Lindsay (2003), Prestowitz (2003), Hersh (2004), Mann (2004), and Soderberg (2005).

by the constraints on that power exerted by multilateral institutions, the neoconservatives were willing (and perhaps eager) to act unilaterally in the pursuit of national interests. In overthrowing the constraints on American power, however, they have weakened American authority. By failing to garner international legitimacy, and indeed, demonstrating that it is willing to act even despite the opposition of other key states, the Bush administration undermines the authority the United States has long cultivated and enjoyed (Tucker and Hendrickson 2004; Walt 2005). Paradoxically, even while making American power more "useable," the neoconservatives have foregone the force multiplier of international cooperation and, more importantly, international consent. This may well leave the United States weaker in overall power over the long term.

#### The Future of East-West Relations

The future of East–West relations, the subject of this symposium, centers on whether the U.S. can maintain its authority within the world system. As acknowledged above, if current trends continue there is little doubt that China will eventually overtake the United States in certain hard power indicators. Yet, greater Chinese power need not imply greater conflict with the United States if the latter uses its authority wisely.

Authority has traditionally served to enhance the raw power resources of the United States. By establishing regional hegemonies, the United States has not only protected its "flanks," so to speak, by ensuring that enemies cannot challenge it from within its spheres of influence, but it has also enhanced the contributions of its partners to the collective defense, secured stable forward bases from which to project its own power, and earned the greater freedom of international action that comes from the consent of other states. If the United States can maintain and, possibly, even enhance its regional hegemonies in the Western hemisphere, Europe and Northeast Asia, and expand its authority into other areas of Asia, it can then compete more effectively even with a materially stronger China. The United States will possess a strong phalanx of subordinates who follow its lead.

Alternatively, the United States may also be able to extend a measure of authority over China itself. By embedding China into an American-led international order that protects the territorial integrity and national interests of its members and generates prosperity for all from secure property rights, monetary stability, and trade openness, the benefits to Beijing from living within this order may exceed the benefits of a Chinese-led order obtained only through a costly challenge to the United States; if so, the benefits of consenting to American authority might be greater than the prospects of a costly confrontation. In this scenario, American-Chinese relations in the future might more resemble those between the United States and the European Union today. Despite its lack of a common foreign and security policy, the aggregate power resources of the European Union are already greater than those of the United States. Yet, because Europe has remained subordinate to the Untied States and consents to remain within an American-led international order, few in Washington worry about conflict with the continent. 12 As a unitary state, China would, of course, be a more formidable foe and would likely insist upon greater autonomy for itself than Europe, but the benefits of the security and economic order produced through American authority could nonetheless mitigate the extent and depth of a new "superpower" competition in Asia.

To build and maintain authority, there are two necessary requirements: to provide a social order that benefits subordinates, and thereby binds them into that order, and to commit credibly not to exploit subordinates once they have consented to one's authority. To lead, one must have followers, and other states will not follow

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>For a more pessimistic view on U.S.-European relations, see Kupchan (2002).

the United States or anyone else unless they expect to benefit from the social order both collectively and individually. This suggests that even in an authoritative order, there will be hard bargaining between the United States and China, perhaps most visibly over the issue of Taiwan, but really about the division of the costs and benefits of an American-led regional order. Nonetheless, if the United States invests in authority and works to maintain the legitimacy of its policies, it can build a community of states that will enhance its ability to succeed in the world and that will continue to follow its lead even as its hard power wanes.

The great mistake of United States foreign policy today is to believe that the country lives and acts in a world in which only "hard power" or coercive capabilities matter, rather than recognizing that it actually inhabits a political world in which authority plays an important role in governing relations between states. Having demonstrated in the 2003 Iraq War that it is willing to act in ways Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan called "illegal," it is not clear how the United States can once again convince others that it will not abuse any future authority they might confer upon it. Nor is it likely that the American public would be willing to pay the now higher costs of a credible signal of their willingness to work within the limits of international consent. But the future of East–West relations will be colored deeply not just by aggregate power trends but also by how the United States conducts itself in the world—and especially by whether the nation leads through brute force or invests in regaining and renewing its international authority.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>"Lessons of Iraq war underscore the importance of UN Charter–Annan." September 16, 2004. UN News Centre, http://www.un.org/apps/news/storyAr.asp?NewsID=11953&Cr=Iraq&Cr1 = . Accessed May 6, 2005.

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