

Hegemony of the United States and the Middle East

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Abstract

The hegemony of the United States (US) in the international order is a widely accepted truth in today's world. During the Cold War era, the US predominance was greatly curtailed by the power of the Soviet Union and after the Soviet Union's disintegration, the US rose to power as the undisputed hegemon in the international order. Through the years that followed, the US has been able to influence internal politics of many states using its preponderant power. The Middle East has been and still continues to be a region of great importance in US foreign policy. Since the British forces withdrew from the Middle East, the US has attempted to ensure its preeminence in this strategically important region. Therefore, the US implements various foreign policy strategies which are aimed at enhancing its influence in the Middle East. The main objective of this study is to analyze the foreign policy strategies that the US implements towards the Middle East and examine whether the US foreign policy strategies towards the Middle East serve in safeguarding its hegemonic position in the world order. This study adopts a qualitative methodology and is mainly based on secondary data. An extensive literature survey was conducted and the information and data collected are analyzed in a theoretical perspective. The Hegemonic Stability Theory, Realism, Offensive Realism and Offense-Defense Theory are the main theories that are incorporated in data analysis. In the analysis, US foreign policy towards Iran, Iraq, Israel-Palestine is given prominence. As per the study, the US foreign policy strategies towards the Middle East serve in safeguarding the US hegemony in the world order. However, the US foreign policy strategies towards the Middle Eastern region have a negative impact on the image of the US as a benevolent hegemon.

Keywords: US Hegemony, Foreign Policy, Middle East

Introduction

In the wake of the end of the Cold War, Krauthammer stated, “[o]ur best hope [...] is in American strength and will- the strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them” (1991: 33). These remarks that appeared in *The Unipolar Moment* indicated the emergence of the US as the undisputed superpower in the international system. In early 1990s, when once mighty Soviet Union collapsed and disintegrated, the stage was cleared for America's status as the hegemon providing political leadership to the world (Bozdaglioglu, 2013). In the years that followed, predominance of the US over other states grew rapidly and the US has been able to influence the internal politics of other states (Beyer, 2007).

Hegemony, derived from the Greek word *Hegemonia* means ‘leadership’. In the sphere of international relations, it gives the idea ‘dominance of one state over the other’ (Gilpin, 2004). A hegemon, therefore, means in the international political arena, a leader or a ruler who presides over the other states in the international community. A hegemon, as the preponderant power in the international system, should have the capability to enforce the rules of the international system, the will to do so, and the commitment to a system which is perceived as mutually beneficial to major states. The capability of the hegemon usually rests upon a large growing economy, leading technological sector and the political power backed up by projective military power. In the post-Cold War era, mainly due to the increasingly growing US economy, America's dominance over the world's technological sector, its political stability and its strong military power, the US was known as a hegemonic power.

The preponderance of the US was fittingly pointed out by John Ikenberry stating that US “has become a global unipolar power with unprecedented military and geopolitical capacities” (2005: 359).

The Middle East is an integral part of US foreign policy. Although, the US and the Middle Eastern region are physically distanced, the US had been, has been and is able to influence the internal politics of many Middle Eastern countries, in its attempts to secure its national interests. According to Pelletreau, the US interests in the Greater Middle East include “[...] achieving a just, comprehensive, secure, and durable Arab-Israeli peace; helping maintain the security and well-being of Israel; preventing regional conflicts and supporting friendly nations; ensuring the free flow of oil from the Gulf upon which we (the US) and the other industrial nations depend for our economic security [...] suppressing terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction; containing rogue regimes in Iran, Iraq, and Libya [...]” (1996: 429-432).

Through the means of its foreign policies and strategies towards the Middle East, the US tactically expanded its presence in the region which sequentially has helped the country to assert its hegemonic status in world politics. Under the leadership of successive presidents, the US followed different policies to protect its interests in the Middle East and those policies in return have been instrumental making the US preeminent in the region. Since the 1990s, history bears evidence of the US involvement in two Gulf Wars against Iraq, its unwavering support to Israeli interests, its involvement in Israel-Palestine conflict and its attempts to cripple challenging powers in the Middle East region.

The impact of the US foreign policies and strategies towards the Middle Eastern region on the US hegemony is a subject of intense debate. Specialists in the international relations sphere hold varying opinions and standpoints on whether America’s Middle East strategies serve in safeguarding the US hegemony in world politics.

Hegemony

According to Gilpin (1981), hegemony is one state achieving preeminence over other states in the system and Keohane (1984) defines hegemony as a situation where one state becomes powerful enough and is willing to enforce and maintain essential rules and regulations governing international relations. In the political context, hegemony means one state having the preeminence and preponderance in the international political system and in the economic context, hegemony means one state having the control over raw materials, sources of capital, markets and competitive advantages in the production of highly valued goods (Keohane, 1984).

Antonio Gramsci explains hegemony as “a relation, not of domination by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership. It is the organization of consent” (Beyer, 2007:1 & 2). Here, the role of consensus is given much emphasis. Later, Gramsci associates the concept of coercion with consent when describing hegemony and defines hegemony as a combination of force and consent. He explains that the use of force or coercion without the provision of leadership or the consensus becomes a form of dictatorship. So, according to Beyer (2007), a hegemon always attempts to make its leadership appear accepted or consensual. The concept of hegemony means the preeminence or the exercise of authority by a superior actor, so, hegemony implicitly indicates the power disparity or the hierarchical power structure in the international system (Bozdaglioglu, 2013).

US Hegemony

In the wake of the end of the Cold War, Krauthammer wrote “the immediate post-Cold War world [...] is unipolar. The center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies (1991: 23)”. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, many scholars made assumptions about the nature of the world system which would dawn after the Cold War. Among those assumptions, the most important had been the one that said the bipolarity during the Cold War would be transformed into a multipolar world where there are new centers of power in Japan, Germany or Europe, China and Soviet Russia. However, Krauthammer states that even though there are second rank powers with economic, diplomatic and military capabilities, “there is but one first-rate power and no prospect in the immediate future of any power to rival it” (1991: 24). Huntington, writing in 1999 also affirms that the US is the only state with predominance in every sphere of power such as economic, military, diplomatic, ideological, technological and cultural and that the US has the capability to promote its interests in almost every part of the world. In this unipolar world, the preponderance of the US would be the first of its kind after the heights of Roman power (Krauthammer, 1991; Bell, 1999; Allison, 2007).

At the end of the Cold War, what Krauthammer called the ‘unipolar moment’ of American hegemony, according to Bell (1999), will last for another four decades or so and possibly for a longer time period as the gap that the other competing major powers have to overcome in order to challenge the US power is insurmountable.

Layne (2006) points out that the US hegemony is the product of two factors. The first factor is that the US has preeminence in both military and economic power and the second is, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is no great power capable of challenging US supremacy. The US has the military capability to deter enemies, keep its allies under control, retain influence and to win wars (Cox, 2001). Moreover, as Layne (2006) remarks, since the early 1940s, the US has attempted to create a unipolar world where its power would be unparalleled. The US has maintained permanent military presence in Western Europe, East Asia and the Persian Gulf and since 1990s, the George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush administrations implemented strategies to prevent the emergence of competing great powers.

In this line of thought, the US is considered a status quo power who tries to maintain its superpower position by making sure that the existing power distribution in the world continues. To maintain the distribution of power, the hegemonic state prevents new poles of power from emerging and challenging its power. Moreover, the US can also be regarded as an expansionist power who seeks to expand its power and to “extend its geopolitical and ideological reach” (Layne, 2006: 13).

While Jonathan Schell (2005) states that one of most difficult things to measure in today’s world is the extent of American preeminence, yet, there are scholars who see the US as a declining hegemony (Debin et al., 2012; Shor, 2010; Layne, 2006). Just as the powerful empires like the Persian Empire, Roman Empire, Ottoman Empire and British Empire were disintegrated with the course of time, some scholars believe the days of the US hegemony are also numbered (Debin et al., 2012). Huntington (1999) states that in a unipolar world, a hegemon maintains its control over the other actors in the world system until its power declines due to the internal decay or challenges from external forces as were the cases with the fifth century Rome and the nineteenth century China. However, in the academia of international relations, there is also a belief that the US would not be facing a similar fate like its hegemonic predecessors. According to Layne (2006), there are two lines arguments for the

claim that the US would not decline as a hegemon. The first line of argument is that there are no states in the international system that are capable of challenging the military and the economic might of the US. William Wohlforth (2002) states that in a unipolar world counterbalancing the power of the strongest nation becomes ‘prohibitively costly’. Further, some scholars also argue that there is no state that could act as “a coalition magnet” to attract other states to organize a counter coalition (Layne, 2006: 14 & 15). The second line of argument is that the power of the US would not decline because it is a benevolent hegemon.

Benevolence of US Hegemony

Allison (2007) states that the US prefers to identify itself as a benign hegemon or a non-imperialist superpower and Layne (2006) also affirms that many US policy makers project the US as a benevolent hegemon. In January 1992, President George H. W. Bush stated in the State of the Union address that “[a] world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and preeminent superpower: the United States of America. And they regard this with no dread. For the world trusts us with power—and the world is right. They trust us to be fair and restrained; they trust us to be on the side of decency. They trust us to do what’s right” (Layne, 2006: 19)

Hegemonic benevolence of the US was again reiterated in President George W. Bush’s 2004 State of the Union address when he stated that the US does not have the ‘desire to dominate’ or ‘ambitions of empire’. Further, the Bush administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy claims that the hegemony of the US will be accepted by the world community as it seeks to establish a balance of power giving importance to human freedom.

Despite the claims that the US is the first global power in history that is not an imperial power (Berger, 1991), many scholars deny the idea that the US is a benign hegemon. Huntington (1999) states that benign hegemony is in the eye of the hegemon and citing a British diplomat, points out that, one reads about the world's desire for American leadership only in the US and everywhere else, people talk about American arrogance and unilateralism.

After 9/11 terrorist attacks

Michael Cox states that “[t]he events of 11 September certainly proved something which many of us had always known: that, like other countries around the world, the US was deeply vulnerable” (2002: 262 & 263). Since the end of the Cold War, the preeminence of the US rose to unparalleled levels and the economic, political and military might of the US was seen as invincible. With the 9/11 terrorist attacks which brought about severe repercussions, the US supremacy in the international order was severely affected. Expressing a similar opinion, Debin et al. state that the 9/11 attacks “posed a serious threat to the American hegemonic ideals” and that the attacks questioned the capability of the US to protect the rest of the world from rogue states when the US itself is not safer. They further state that American invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003 “proved a last nail in the coffin of American hegemony” (2012: 144).

However, as Allison states, the 9/11 “only added more authority to US unipolarity” (2007: 96). Krauthammer (cited in Allison, 2007: 96) in his article *Unipolar Moment Revisited*, discusses three different ways that 11 September helped the US hegemony. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US launched the War on Terror and destroyed the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in a shorter time period. According to Krauthammer, this showed the world the might of the US military power. He states that what the world deemed to exist was exposed in

all its 'fury'. Further, Krauthammer points out that the manner in which the American economy recovered and the US administration responded to the crisis showed the 'recuperative powers' of the US economy and the political structure. Thirdly, after the terrorist attacks, instead of aligning to counterbalance the power of the US, the powers such as India, Pakistan and Russia assembled together to assist the hegemon which only guaranteed the US hegemony in the world order.

Posen (2003) states, the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent War on Terror, have provided an important foundation of domestic political support for a hegemonic foreign policy. Posen explains that even though the US has been a great power for at least a century, it implemented a policy of hegemony only in the late 1990s. At that time, the public opinion about hegemonic policies did not play a significant role, so, according to Posen, the 9/11 attacks provided favourable grounds to obtain public support for its hegemony.

US Foreign Policy towards the Middle East and its Impact on US Hegemony

Foreign policy of a country is of utmost importance as it determines the manner in which the states maintain their relations with other states in the global arena. It is also a tool that countries utilize in order to secure its national interests. US has several vital interests in the Middle Eastern region and the US implements foreign policies to maintain its preeminence in the region. At the same time, many of those policies are also aimed at safeguarding the US hegemony in the world order. For the convenience of the study, US foreign policy towards only Iran, Iraq, Israel and Palestine is analyzed in order to examine whether the US policies and strategies towards the Middle Eastern region serve in safeguarding the US hegemony in the world order.

Iran

Iran is a strategically important state in the Gulf region for the US due to its historical significance, geographical location and the economic and technological development (Khan, 2011; Cordesman & Al-Rodhan, 2006). It is the second largest and the most populous country in the Gulf region and its adjacency to the Strait of Hormuz gives the country the control of important sea lines through which the West has their access to the Gulf oil. Further, the country is bestowed with vast energy resources and it possesses 11.1% of the world oil reserves and 15.3% of the world natural gas reserves (Cordesman & Al-Rodhan, 2006).

According to offensive realists, the international system is an anarchic realm and states, the main actors in world politics are compelled to pursue security and power to ensure their survival. Under offensive realism, it is further argued that it is strategically advantageous for states to accumulate as much power as possible and to pursue hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2013). Moreover, in offense-defense theory, it is assumed that the states seek to maximize their power through self-help measures. The self-help measures usually include unilateral acquisition of economic, military or technological capabilities which are used to protect themselves from an attack from another state (defensive) or to conquer and destroy a rival state and expand one's territory or capabilities (offensive) (Lynn-Jones, 1995). US foreign policy towards Iran and its impact on US hegemony can be analyzed along these theoretical perspectives.

The land marks of the US-Iran relations can be traced back to the Cold War era. In order to contain the communist influence in the Gulf region, the US supported many gulf countries. Since 1971, when the British withdrew from the Persian Gulf, maintaining the stability of the

region as well as containing the communist influence became the main US concerns. Therefore, the US followed the ‘twin pillar’ policy through which “Iran and Saudi Arabia were designated as the US surrogates for the security of the region” (Khan, 2011: 43). The containment of the Soviet expansion and ensuring the stability of the region were fulfilled through the help of the friendly local governments.

The US government maintained close relations with Shah Pahlavi who did not pose a threat to the main US interests in Iran. In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) even led a coup against the nationalist prime minister of Iran who attempted to nationalize the foreign oil companies in Iran. By leading the coup, the friendly Shah’s reign was protected and at the same time, US access to Iran’s oil was ensured. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter stated that “Iran, because of the great leadership of the Shah is an island of stability in one of the more troubled regions of the world” (Watson Institute for International Studies, 2011: 18). Although, Shah Pahlavi was a weak leader and his regime was marked by corruption and suppression, the US government assisted the shah in order to secure its vital interests and to maximize the national power.

In 1978, with the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Shah Pahlavi’s reign came to an end and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the spiritual leader of the Islamic Movement introduced many reforms in order to transform Iran into a pure Islamic state. In 1979, Iran Hostage Crisis where the US embassy in Tehran was attacked by a group of Iranian Islamists led to strained US-Iran relations and this incident shaped US perception and the US policies towards Iran for the decades that followed.

To contain the influence of the Islamic Revolution in the region, the US initiated the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. The main aims of establishing the GCC were to enhance the security cooperation among the Gulf countries and to deal with economic and political issues in the region (Khan, 2011). After 1980, when the Iran-Iraq war was ensued, the Reagan administration officially remained neutral in the conflict, but, the US secretly gave Iraq military intelligence and loans to buy advanced US weapons to weaken Iran’s power. The US even permitted Kuwaiti ships and war vessels to sail under the US flag. In seeking to destroy a rival power that threatens its vital interests, the US also initiated an international arms embargo against Iran (Watson Institute for International Studies, 2011).

In the post-Cold War era, the US government adopted a policy of ‘dual containment’ towards Iran and Iraq. According to Indyk (1999), the policy of dual containment marked a shift from the former US policy of relying on either Iraq or Iran to balance each other and it emphasized that, as the two states are clearly hostile to the US and its interests in the region, both states should be contained. In dual containment, the main objective was to isolate these regimes politically, economically and militarily (Khan, 2011). The US also sought to prevent Iran from acquiring and developing weapons of mass destruction and the ballistic missiles necessary to deliver them. Evidently, in the post-Cold War era, the US sought to prevent Iran, an important regional power, from acquiring more power and to minimize the probability that US interests or the US as a state would be challenged by another member of the international community.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks the US-Iran relations became more strained as President George W. Bush included Iran in the list of countries that he identified as the ‘Axis of Evil’. The US launched its global War on Terror in response to the terrorist attacks and the country became more militarily and politically involved in the Middle Eastern region, playing the role of the “international police” (Khan, 2011: 45). When details about Iran’s national nuclear programme were disclosed, the US preponderant power was greatly affected. Since then, preventing Iran from enhancing their nuclear capabilities became a priority in the US national security agenda.

Further, election of hardliner Ahmadinejad to the presidency of Iran in 2005 made Iran an even greater concern for the US. Iran's opposition to the US led Middle East Peace Process, Iran's attempts to develop weapons of mass destruction and its aid to terrorist organizations made the US distrustful of every move the Iranian government makes. Following the US War on Terror, the 'rogue' regimes of Afghanistan and Iraq were destroyed, so, automatically; two of Iran's major regional enemies were contained. This caused Iran's power to grow further and the increased power of a regional player has a negative impact on the hegemony of the US in the international arena. So, the US sought to prevent Iran from gaining strength by way of expanding US relations with other Arab countries and seeking to isolate and restrict Iran in the Gulf region. Moreover, the US network of formal and informal security commitments to the southern Gulf States is also used to contain the growing power of Iran. According to Khan, "[...] approximately 10,000-15,000 US troops associated with the Fifth Fleet and rotational air force deployments in Saudi Arabia are in the Gulf region at any given time, plus troops participating in exercises. The United States also has large quantities of pre-positioned equipment in Kuwait and Qatar and is negotiating for permission to move additional equipment to the United Arab Emirates" (2011: 45-46).

According to the US policy makers, the extensive US military presence in the Gulf region is intended for ensuring the regional stability and the protection of friendly states, but in reality, it is intended to contain the growing power of Iran and to display the preponderant military power of the US. Under Obama administration, the US is forging stronger relations with Saudi Arabia and other friendly Gulf states to speed up the supply of arms to the region as well as to upgrade the defenses for oil terminals and other key infrastructure in the region. Further, on 22nd July, 2009, Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State for Foreign Relations proposed policies to extend the US defense umbrella over the Persian Gulf states, reiterating the US efforts to counter-balance Iran's power (Khan, 2011).

These attempts to expand US relations with other Arab countries and to enhance US military presence in the Gulf region are evidently intended to create a strategic encirclement of Iran. With the US military presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the US either has close allies or military engagements in all the states surrounding the Iranian territory.

For a hegemon to wield its power, it should be ensured that other main players in the international system do not accumulate more power and security. So, the US utilizes its foreign policy strategies to maximize its own security and at the same time to prevent rival powers from emerging.

In spite of Iran's growing power, has Iran been able to seriously affect US hegemony?

First, Iran is not militarily equipped enough to challenge the predominant military strength of the US.

According to Khan, "[i]ts (Iran's) missile arsenal does not have the strike capability to hit mainland USA. Nor does Iran have force projection capabilities [...] Even if Iran develops nuclear weapons, it still does not have any chance to match the nuclear might of the United States" (2011: 51).

Khan (2011) further points out that the US has installed upgraded Patriot missiles at Qatar, apart from the navy ships that are capable of destroying Iranian missiles in flight. Most importantly, the Iranian territory has been encircled by either states where the US has significant military presence or states which are close allies of the US. So, Iran is not in a position to militarily challenge the US seriously.

On the other hand, as a response to the growing power of Iran, the neighbouring states in the region have taken several steps and implemented policies that clearly indicate that Iran would not have their backing if Iran becomes a target of US military intervention. To balance

against Iran's nuclear capabilities, the neighbouring Arab states have expressed their interest in acquiring nuclear capabilities similar to that of Iran's for their domestic consumption. But, those countries claim the ownership of a significant portion of world's known oil reserves, so, it is apparent that their main motive is to counter-balance Iran's power. Also, they have voiced their concerns over the environmental damage that is probable to take place if an accident or a natural disaster hit the nuclear plants. Further, states such as Egypt and Jordan have criticized the formation of a 'Shi'a Crescent' with Iran as its leading country (Khan, 2011).

Even though Iran has a large population, economic capabilities, large territory, advanced technology and strong cultural heritage and is capable of a significant regional influence, it has no capability of shifting the balance of power in its favour. So, it is evident that the foreign policy strategies that the US extend towards Iran have served in safeguarding the US hegemony in the world.

Iraq

Owing to its strategic location, natural energy resources, its access to water and its fertile soil, Iraq assumes a significant status in the foreign policy strategies of many major powers in the world today. It had been strategically important for the Romans, Persians, Muslims, Mongols and the British in the past and at present, the policies towards Iraq constitute an essential aspect in the US national security agenda.

According to the hegemonic stability theory, the stability of the international system occurs when there is a dominant power: hegemon. The benevolent hegemon provides collective public goods such as peace and security and ensure an international system of relative peace and security (Bozdaglioglu, 2013).

The role of the US as a benevolent hegemon was significant during the Iraq- Kuwait war of 1990. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was met with condemnation by the international community and the US utilized the opportunity to assume its hegemonic role in the Middle Eastern region as well as in the international system as a whole. With Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the oil deposits in Kuwait came under the power of Saddam Hussein and President George H. W. Bush stated that the American way of life, the American freedom, as well as the freedom of friendly nations in the world would be disturbed if Saddam Hussein controls the world's oil reserves (Watson Institute for International Studies, 2011). The US responded to the Kuwait's invasion by supporting the United Nations Security Council resolution demanding the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The US immediately positioned its troops in Saudi Arabia and built an international coalition to free Kuwait from Saddam Hussein's authority.

Following the victory of the US and the coalition forces in the Gulf War in 1991, the US was regarded as a benevolent hegemon who ensures the stability and the security in the international system. US immediately responded to protect the sovereignty of Kuwait which was blatantly disregarded by Saddam Hussein. During the early and the mid-1990s, the foreign policy that the US followed towards the Iraqi regime was instrumental in reassuring the US hegemony in the Middle Eastern region as well as in the world order.

After the Gulf War, Iraq continuously defied UN resolutions demanding to relinquish its remaining weapons of mass destruction and to improve the human rights conditions in Iraq and the US believed that Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule is dangerous and defiant (Indyk, 1999). The US also believed that the Saddam Hussein regime was a threat to the Gulf region, a threat to its own people.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US government implemented a policy of coercive diplomacy towards Iraq. In 2003, the US and the allied forces launched the Operation Iraqi Freedom and invaded Iraq with the purpose of ending the regime of Saddam Hussein,

identifying, isolating and eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, forcing the terrorists out of Iraqi territory, and immediately delivering humanitarian support to the displaced Iraqi people. Among other purposes of the invasion are securing Iraq's oil fields and assisting Iraq for a transition to a representative self-government. However, the US invasion of Iraq is one of the most controversial issues in world politics as the US was unable to prove the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraqi territory (Parasiliti, 2012).

Hinnebusch states that "there appears to be an especially radical cleavage between the justifications for war advanced by its proponents—Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)—which proved to be hollow, and the actual motives and causes" (2007: 220- 222). So, the inability of the US to prove Iraq had serious WMD capability which can threaten US power has raised questions about the true intentions and motives of engaging in an invasion of Iraq.

When contemplating the real motives behind US invasion of Iraq, maintaining the US power over the Gulf oil has been the most pressing motive. The US is highly dependent on the Middle Eastern oil and as the oil market is getting tighter and the balance of power is shifted in favour of the oil producers, an invasion on Iraq has been a viable option. Moreover, the US was concerned about its growing dependence on Saudi Arabia in accessing oil and moderating the oil prices. Therefore, Iraq with its large discovered and undiscovered oil reserves became a worthy target. Further, the Pax Americana which was established after the Gulf war in 1991 was under immense threat. Iran and Iraq started recovering from the US policy of dual containment and the continued economic sanctions on Iraq were criticized as they caused suffering to Iraqi people. So, the US invasion of Iraq can be seen as a reassertion of US hegemony in the Middle East by demonstrating the US military preponderance and by subduing Iraq who blatantly defied the US power (Hinnebusch, 2007). Hypothetically, even if Iraq has been developing weapons of mass destruction, Iraq does not have the capability to challenge the military capabilities of the US, but, it will be a threat to the US freedom of action in the Gulf region and to Israel which is a close ally of the US. So, it is evident that maintaining the strategic presence and hegemony of the US in the Middle Eastern region has been the greatest priority.

According to Parasiliti "the notion of a US cakewalk in Iraq was indeed fantasy" (2012: 128). President George W. Bush's mission of freeing the Iraqi people also has not been realized. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, stability was not established in Iraq as the US government had intended. Handing over authority to a sovereign regime was not realized smoothly and Iraq is currently suffering from a series of sectarian disputes between the Shi'ite and Sunni groups as well as from acts of violence by Kurdish rebels. So, the stability emphasized in the hegemonic stability theory was not accomplished in the US invasion of Iraq.

However, the US invasion of Iraq clearly displayed that the US military might is still unchallenged and that the US would take whatever the steps necessary to make sure that its national interests are fulfilled. Clearly, any other actor in the world does not have the capacity or the willingness to challenge US preponderance.

Evidently, the foreign policy strategies that the US has implemented towards Iraq have helped the US to assert its hegemonic status in the Middle Eastern region and in the world order. Hegemony means the preponderance of one state over the others, so, without doubt, the US foreign policy strategies towards Iraq have served in safeguarding US preeminence and US hegemony in the world order. Nevertheless, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 has led to the decline of credibility of the US leadership and the benevolence of the US hegemony.

Israel- Palestine

Since the 1947 partition plan of the United Nations and the creation of the new state of Israel, both Israel and Palestine have become significant in America's Middle East policy.

The US has been a close ally of Israel since its creation. In fact, the US was the first country to give Israel the de facto recognition when it declared independence in 1948. Since then, the US maintains cordial relations with Israel in the form of military and financial aid, trade and commerce and economic and scientific agreements. During the Cold War, the US maintained strong relations with Israel in order to use the country as a tool to contain Soviet influence in the Middle Eastern region. The US used diplomatic, economic and military relations to make sure that Israel supports the anti-Soviet bloc. In the post-World War II period, Arab nationalism became widespread and popular among the Middle Eastern states and Egypt's Gamal Abdal-Nasser started campaigning for Pan-Arabism: the unification of Arabs into a single state. The US disliked the growing popularity of Nasser and saw Israel as an ally in its attempts at containing growing Arab influence in the Middle East. In 1962, President John F. Kennedy stated that the US is "interested that Israel should keep up its sensitive, tremendous, historic task". The US government provided Israel military equipment and weapons and financial aid during the Six Day War in 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli war. (Watson Institute for International Studies, 2011: 14).

US foreign policy towards Palestine mainly revolves around US assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA) to counter terrorism activities in areas under the PA and to ensure civil security. The office of U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC) for Israel and the Palestinian Authority, established in 2005 is one such institution which provide assistance to help reform, train, and equip PA security forces (Zanotti, 2009).

As contended in the hegemonic stability theory, the benevolent hegemon provides the public, collective goods in the form of security and the stability of the international system. The stability of the Middle Eastern region constitutes one of the most significant US interests as the regional stability ensures continuing US access to Middle Eastern oil resources. So, it becomes of paramount importance for the US to play the role of a benevolent hegemon, by brokering peace between Arabs and Israelis and between Israelis and Palestinians (Migdalovitz, 2009). In 1978, President Jimmy Carter was instrumental in bringing about the Camp David accord which produced a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. President George H.W. Bush together with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev convened the peace conference in Madrid in 1990 and successful negotiations between Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians were accomplished. The US also became a mediator in resolving the decades-long Israel-Palestine conflict. President Clinton hosted the Israeli-Palestinian summit at Camp David in 2000, even though it did not reach a final peace settlement (Migdalovitz, 2009).

Despite the US has been acting as a broker of peace between the Israelis and Arabs as well as between Israelis and Palestinians, the partiality that the US shows towards Israel in this aspect has had a negative impact on the US image as a benevolent hegemon.

Although, all the US administrations had the knowledge of Israel's nuclear capability, the US has not implemented any policies to prevent Israel from gaining nuclear power. Also, when the Israeli government launched the 'Days of Wrath' campaign against Lebanon inflicting death and suffering on the civilian populations, the US turned a blind eye while the sovereignty of Lebanon was violated. Moreover, the US government's unwavering commitment to supply weaponry and to make the Israeli forces militarily powerful than its

Arab neighbours makes the US a partial mediator. Further, Israel has always been favoured by the US government as a recipient of US financial and military aid. The US, being the hegemon responsible for the stability of the international order, is more concerned about maintaining close relations with Israel and ensuring that Israel is militarily more empowered than any alliance of Arab countries (Falk, 1997). So, due to these reasons, the credibility of the US as an honest broker is declined.

Even though, the US is not committed to provide public goods to the international community and its image as an impartial mediator in the Israel-Palestine conflict has declined, Palestinians still regard the US fit for the role of an honest broker. In spite of the clear partiality towards Israel, any other country in the world community does not even propose that the US is not suited for the task. The main reason behind this situation is neither Palestine nor any other country in the international system is willing to challenge the military prowess of the US. Falk also states ‘...the US (is)... the undisputed geopolitical leader and the dominant state in the Middle East’ (1997: 5). The preponderant power of the US is not even challenged or questioned by a regional power or a regional actor. The Arab unity which was once capable of challenging the US power was also proved to be null and void at the Camp David Accords in 1978, when Egypt became pro-Israel and pro-American. So, the reality is that even though the credibility of the US is greatly harmed, it still presides over the hegemonic position in the Middle East as well as in the world. So, it is evident that the US hegemony does not comply with the Gramscian version of the concept of hegemony. Gramsci stated that the hegemony is a relation of consent achieved through political and ideological leadership, not a relation of domination by means of force (cited in Beyer, 2007). The aspect of ‘consensus’ is becoming more and more detached from the US hegemony. The US foreign policies and strategies towards Israel and Palestine serve in safeguarding the US hegemony in the world order, but, it also becomes evident through the US policies implemented that the US hegemony is not benevolent.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study is to examine whether the foreign policy strategies that the US implements towards the Middle Eastern region serve in safeguarding the US hegemony in the world order.

The Middle East has been, is and will be a strategically important region for the US policies and strategies. Therefore, in Iran, Iraq, Israel and Palestine, the US has multiple interests and the US administrations implement various foreign policy strategies to fulfill those interests. The US foreign policy towards Iran is mainly aimed at containing Iran’s growing power and eliminating the threat of nuclear weapons. Through its policies towards Iran, the US has been able to fulfill its vital interests and at the same time, safeguard its hegemonic power position. In Iraq, after the Gulf War in 1991, the US was considered the benevolent hegemon ensuring the stability of the international system. Due to the unilateralism with which the US acted and invaded Iraq in 2003, and due to the inability of the US administration to prove the existence of WMD in Iraq, the credibility of the US declined. However, US hegemony remains unchallenged. Moreover, the US displays unwavering support towards Israel and it becomes evident that the main aim of the US is not to bring about peace and security in the Middle Eastern region through brokering peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but to empower Israel to balance against the Arab powers in the region.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the US foreign policy strategies towards the Middle East serve in safeguarding the US hegemony in the world order. However, the US foreign policy strategies towards the Middle Eastern region have affected the credibility and the image of the US as a benevolent hegemon.

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