

Foreign Policy of the United States and US Rise to Hegemony

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Abstract

In today's competitive international arena, it is widely known that the United States (US) is at the top of the world's hierarchy of power. The US emerged preeminent from the II World War and ever since, the country is predominant in world's economic, political, technological and military sectors. Though the Soviet Union posed a substantial threat to the preponderance of the US during the Cold War, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the US rose to power as the undisputed hegemon in the international order. In its relations with other actors in the international system, the US utilizes its foreign policy to achieve its national interests as well as secure its hegemonic ambitions. The objective of the study is to analyze the US foreign policy and identify the causes and circumstances that led to the hegemony of the US. This study is mainly based on secondary data such as books, articles, newspapers, journals and the World Wide Web is also used as an important research tool. The analysis of the data and information collected is done in a theoretical perspective using hegemonic stability theory and cycles of hegemony and war theory. As per the study, the US foreign policy during the II World War, decline of Britain's power, post-II World War and Cold War policies of the US and the disintegration of the Soviet Union paved the way for US hegemony in the world order.

Keywords: Hegemony, Foreign Policy, US Rise to Power

Introduction

The term 'hegemony' is derived from the Greek word *Hegemonia* which gives the idea of 'leadership'. In the field of international relations, it means one state gaining dominance over the other (Beyer, 2007). According to Keohane (1984, cited in Bozdaglioglu, 2013), hegemony is 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, hegemons have preponderance in the international political system and in the economic context, hegemons control raw materials and markets and have competitive advantage in the production of goods.

Towards the end of the Cold War, many scholars made assumptions that the US would emerge as the sole super power in the international system. Among those scholars, Krauthammer writes in 1991 that the immediate post-Cold War world will be unipolar with the US at the leader position. Krauthammer further states (1991) that even though there are second rank powers with economic, diplomatic and military capabilities, the US will be the first-rate power which will not be challenged by any other power. Huntington affirms in 1999 that the US is the only power which is predominant in economic, military, diplomatic, ideological, technological and cultural spheres in the world. Even today, the US uses its military, economic, technological and ideological power to enforce the rules which govern the international political and economic system.

Even though much emphasis is given to the US preponderant power after the Cold War, there are many scholars who trace the US hegemony in the world order back to the closure of the II World War. In the years that followed the II World War, there were many limits to the US power; but, the restoration and the maintenance of international stability in the post-II World War period would not have been possible without the superpower capabilities of the US (Beyer, 2007 & Cox, 2001).

Foreign Policy

According to Tayfur, “foreign policy is the behavior of states mainly towards other states in the international system through authorized agents” (1994: 113). As the term ‘foreign’ indicates, the foreign policy of a country is a plan of action which is directed and implemented outside the domestic boundaries of a country in order to fulfill specific goals. Wallace (1974) defines foreign policy as a boundary issue between the domestic politics of a country and the international environment. It bridges the gap between the nation state and the international environment; and the gap between the domestic politics and the international politics. According to Hussain & Yasmeen, “[t]he foreign policy of a country is the reflection of its national interests and will of the people (2004: 27).

The foreign policy gives voice to the national interests of a country outside of its territorial boundaries as the states usually attempt to secure their vital interests while interacting with other actors in the international system. So, invariably, the factors such as domestic culture, domestic political culture, social norms and traditions, economic development, geography and domestic power structure affect the formulation and the implementation of the foreign policy of a country. Moreover, the personalities of the leaders and policy makers, the governmental structures and institutions and various interest groups have a greater influence on foreign policy formulation.

James N. Rosenau (1976) has pointed out that there are three conceptualizations of foreign policy: foreign policy as orientations, foreign policy as plans and commitments and foreign policy as activities. In the conceptualization of foreign policy as orientations, the foreign policy of a country refers to tendencies, traditions and principles which determine the state behavior in international affairs. Foreign policy as plans and commitments refers to decisions and policies that the states take and implement in order to fulfill specific goals in their relations with other states. Foreign policy in the form of activities refers to the behavior of states in the international system and the actions and reactions that states take when faced with various international events, circumstances and problems.

Hegemonic Stability Theory

Hegemonic stability theory originally is a theory of international political economy. This theory posits that a liberal economic order and the stability occur when there is a dominant power: hegemon. Charles Kindleberger (1979) formulated the theory and argued that there should be one stabilizer to stabilize the world economy. He contends that the stability of the free trade requires a benevolent hegemon to provide institutional public goods (cited in Bozdaglioglu, 2013). According to Kindleberger, a stable economic order is a public or a collective good, since all the countries benefit from it. Further, Kindleberger argues that the power of a single dominant power is essential to induce cooperation in the world system. According to Bozdaglioglu (2013), there are two forms of hegemonic stability theory that can be identified: collective goods version and the security version.

In the collective goods version, the theory contends that the hegemon should be larger than the other states in the system and it will capture a portion of the benefits of public goods larger than the cost it takes to provide them. Also, it posits that even though, the hegemon benefits from the public collective goods, the smaller subordinate states gain even more.

In the security version of the theory, it is argued that the hegemonic states provide different kinds of public goods such as peace and security. Gilpin (1981, cited in Bozdaglioglu, 2013) states that hegemons organize political, territorial, and especially economic relations and

ensure an international system of relative peace and security. He further states that hegemons succeed in their hegemonic role because they impose their will on subordinate states and the subordinate states benefit and accept their leadership.

Cycles of Hegemony and War Theory

In this theory, Gilpin (1981) uses the realist assumptions to reinterpret the past 2400 years of western history (Keohane, 1986). Gilpin assumes that the states, the principal actors in world politics, make cost-benefit calculations about the alternative courses of action and that the states may attempt to change the international system if the expected benefits of so doing exceed the costs.

According to Keohane (1986), Gilpin sees the world history as an unending series of cycles. Gilpin states “the conclusion of one hegemonic war is the beginning of another cycle of growth, expansion and eventual decline” (Cited in Keohane, 1986: 177). So, at the end of one hegemonic war, the ‘hierarchy of prestige’ becomes inconsistent with the power relations and the war establishes new hierarchy of prestige determining the new actors who would dominate the world politics.

Gilpin explains the hegemonic decline in a number of ways. He states, as discussed in realism, that the most dominant cause for wars and changes in the international system are the uneven growth of power among states. So, he argues that when the distribution of power shifts over a period of time, it brings about changes in the relations among states and the nature of international relations. Then, he states that the hegemonic states tend to consume more and spend less and they may suffer diminishing returns due to the expansion of its defense perimeter and increased military costs. He further explains that the diffusion of technology to other states by the hegemonic states can result in its decline since through the process of technology diffusion; the hegemons lose the advantage on which its political, economic and military superiority depend.

Discussion

II World War and the Decline of Britain

An unforgettable milestone in the history of the US foreign relations and foreign policy is its longstanding isolationism. According to Moon (2005: 2), “no account of American foreign policy can ignore the monumental shadow cast by the deep historical isolationism of the United States”. Since its colonial days for much of its history, the US displayed a strong dislike to get involved in alliances and wars in the world system. Protected from vast oceans, the US adopted a policy of non-entanglement in international politics. The US isolationism was reiterated by George Washington, in his farewell address:

“The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities” (Lillian Goldman Law Library, The Avalon Project, 2008).

The US had been politically isolated throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. During its isolationist policy era, the US expanded its territory, piecing together states to become a unified powerful actor in the Americas. In 1823, President James Monroe stated “in the wars of the European powers, in matters relating to themselves, we have never taken part, nor does it comport with our policy, so to do” (<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1601.html>). Even though, the US isolated itself politically from the European power politics, it continued to expand economically and secure its vital national interests. However, Germany’s submarine warfare against American ships during the I World War paved the way for the US to abandon its isolationist policies and become engaged in the I World War. But, as soon as, the I World War ended, the US again crawled back into its cocoon of isolationism, in spite of the President Woodrow Wilson’s attempts at internationalizing the US.

In the pre- II World War era, Germany and Italy had established their hegemonies in Europe and Africa and the Japanese controlled the East Asia. Even when those axis powers made their advances and the sovereignty of states were blatantly violated, the US refused to enter into a war. On December 7, 1941, Japanese naval forces attacked Pearl Harbour, the US declared war against the axis powers. The British and the French were war-weary and the US demonstrated its military might in the war against the axis powers. The US became the only undamaged power at the end of the World War II, while Britain, France, Germany, China, the Soviet Union, Japan were either invaded, attacked or exhausted by war.

According to Shor,

“World War II [...] provided the U.S. with the historical opportunity to establish its global hegemony. U.S. global hegemony was not only a consequence of economic, political, and military domination, but also a reflection of the diffusion of cultural and ideological values that advanced the role of the United States as a controlling power in the world” (2010: 65 & 66).

As contended in the cycles of hegemony and war theory, the hegemonic states may suffer diminishing returns due to the expansion of its defense perimeter and increased military costs. At the final stages of the II World War, Britain’s military commitments incurred immense costs and as a result, the country’s economy was crippled. As the US acquired nuclear capabilities, the US, comparably a new actor in the world politics, emerged as the new super power. So, the ‘hierarchy of prestige’ became incompatible with the power relations and a new hierarchy of prestige was established, consequent to the decline of Britain’s hegemonic power. The preponderant power of the US surpassed the power of Britain who was considered the world super power up to then.

US Post- II World War Policies

The policy makers of the US administrations sought to establish US pre-eminence in the world order after the II World War. The development of several international and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is among the many US post- II World War policies which helped the US to assert its superpower position in the international system. Gilpin (2002) points out that the US emerged from the I World War

with the vision of creating a new international order. The UN would be responsible for the international peace and order and the Bretton Woods conference of 1944 would include International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) which would be responsible for the promotion of an open, multilateral economy. The institutions established under the Bretton Woods, however, legitimized the monopoly of the US and its Western allies to expropriate the resources of the South and the economic system introduced by the agreement automatically made the developing states dependent on economic aid and loans from the rich countries in the world. To qualify for loans the states had to make structural changes in their national systems to suit for the Western economic system such as privatization of government owned enterprises, devaluation of the national currency and elimination of tariff barriers (Gaan, 2004). The World Bank and the IMF continue their lending policies disregarding the impact of loans on local environments. So, the IMF and the World Bank mostly financed and controlled by the US have a great influence on the policies of developing nations. The US is the largest donor to the UN and is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), so, the US also has the capacity to influence the UN procedures. Evidently, through the international order envisioned and created by the US, the predominance of the US over other states was galvanized.

Hisashi Owada, a distinguished Japanese diplomat points out that after the II World War, the US policy was 'unilateral globalism' and that later it was transformed into a policy of 'global unilateralism'. He emphasizes that the US policies after the II World War helped in ensuring the international security, establishing stronger international institutions and establishing an open global economy (Huntington, 1999).

The Cold War and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Much anticipated international stability and peace after the end of the II World War was short lived and the US and the Soviet Union entered into the Cold War which shaped the world history for decades following the end of the II World War. When the Soviet Union started spreading its communist influence throughout the Europe, the US embarked on policy implementations for the containment of the Soviet influence. The world was divided into two camps: the communist and the capitalist.

According to the hegemonic stability theory, the presence of a dominant power or a hegemon is needed to achieve stability in the international order and to induce cooperation in the world system.

In the security context, the theory posits that the hegemonic states provide different kinds of public goods such as peace and security through political, territorial, and especially economic relations. The theory also assumes that the hegemons impose their will on subordinate states and the subordinate states benefit and accept their leadership. The US assumed the role of a hegemon during the Cold War period, stabilizing the international system and the European allies of the US benefitted from the economic and security ties with the US. The commitment that the US showed to stabilize the destabilized Europe further enhanced predominant position of the US.

When the US and Soviet Union relations deteriorated after 1945, the US often faced the overriding danger of the Soviet threat. So, the US and its allies assumed the task of making economic, political, and security arrangements to counter the threat of Soviet influence. While the Soviet influence loomed large in Europe, the US felt the urgent need to assist the reconstruction of Western Europe as a way of guaranteeing the stability of Western Europe as

well as of containing the communist influence. Therefore, with the cooperation of the Western allies the US undertook several initiatives.

Among those initiatives, the most important is the Marshall Plan. The Western Europe, being financially and militarily bankrupt after two World Wars, desperately needed US economic aid to survive. So, the US drew up the Marshall plan through which the US extended \$17 billion in economic support to help rebuild European economies after the end of the II World War. According to Gilpin (2002),

“The United States was able to finance the system because, at the end of II World War, it was the world's major creditor. Like Great Britain in the late nineteenth century and like Japan in the late twentieth century, the United States used its accumulated wealth to help create a world that American leadership believed would serve both American economic and political interests”.

The formation of the European Common Market or the European Economic Community (EEC) is another initiative led by the US. The main purpose of the EEC was to create a huge market in Western Europe which would give the Western European states the economic strength to resist their domestic economic parties and the influence of the Soviet Union in Western Europe as a whole. The political agenda behind the EEC was to reconcile France and Germany and to obtain the permanent support of Germany to the Western camp of capitalism, minimizing the risk of Germany falling under the flag of the Soviet Union.

In 1949, with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the two sides of the Atlantic militarily and US troops were stationed in Western Europe. Also, NATO brought Western Europe under the nuclear umbrella of the US, so, an attack to Western Europe by the Soviet Union was regarded as attack to the US itself. Through NATO, the security of the US and that of Western Europe were linked and the US was regarded as the ‘Guarantor of Security’ in the international system.

The Cold War tensions were increased as the two powers engaged in an arms race and a space race. In the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the two powers competed for preeminence in the world order.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989, the US became the undisputed superpower in the international community. The US power and predominance was unparalleled and in the years that followed the US asserted its position as the hegemon in the world order.

Conclusion

Through much of its history, the US adopted an isolationist policy and disliked getting engaged in wars and power politics. During the isolationism, the US expanded its territory and continued to expand economically. After the II World War, the US abandoned its isolationist policies and, at the end of the war, came to be regarded as a global super power. With the decline of Britain, the predominance of the US became widespread. The post- II World War policies of the US also contributed in making the US a superpower. Moreover, the policy strategies during the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union made the US the undisputed master of world politics.

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