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Examining the Status of the Current Global Liberal Order

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Executive Summary

- ❖ On occasion, the United States has been unilateral in the economic, military, political, and legal spheres. This article argues that the United States applies double standards, exceptions, and exemptions to the global order. The United States will do everything possible to maintain its uncontested status.
- ❖ The United States still maintains a dominant position in the global order. While this system is largely seen as a public good and normative model for other nations to emulate, the US at times acts in ways that prioritize its national interests, even when doing so deviates from the core tenets and values of the liberal order.
- ❖ There are numerous claims of American decline. Nonetheless, as the liberal order's architecture, the United States has exploited and been immune to the global liberal order. It has been free to pursue its own interests, whereas the rest of the world must adhere to the international liberal order outlined by the United States in order to support its grand plan of dominance.

សេចក្តីសង្ខេបអត្ថបទ

- ❖ នៅក្នុងកាលៈទេសៈខ្លះ សហរដ្ឋអាមេរិកបានធ្វើសកម្មភាពដោយឯកតោភាគីលើឆាកអន្តរជាតិ ជាពិសេសលើវិស័យសេដ្ឋកិច្ច យោធា នយោបាយ និងច្បាប់។ ក្នុងន័យនេះ សហរដ្ឋអាមេរិក បានរំលោភបំពាន និងមិនស្ថិតក្រោមសណ្តាប់ធ្នាប់សេរីដែលខ្លួនបានបង្កើតឡើង ហើយកំពុង អនុវត្តស្តង់ដារទ្វេដើម្បីរក្សាអនុត្តរភាពរបស់ខ្លួន។
- ❖ សហរដ្ឋអាមេរិក នៅតែមានអនុត្តរភាពនិងជាតួអង្គដ៏ចម្បងនៅក្នុងប្រព័ន្ធអន្តរជាតិ។ ទោះបីជា សហរដ្ឋអាមេរិកអះអាងថា សណ្តាប់ធ្នាប់នេះគឺជាគំរូស្តង់ដារតែមួយគត់សម្រាប់ពិភពលោក ទាំងមូល ប៉ុន្តែក្នុងករណីខ្លះសហរដ្ឋអាមេរិកបានអនុវត្តផ្ទុយពីសណ្តាប់ធ្នាប់នេះ ដើម្បីរក្សានិង ទាញយកផលប្រយោជន៍។
- ❖ ទោះបីជាមានការលើកឡើងច្រើនអំពីការធ្លាក់ចុះឥទ្ធិពលរបស់ខ្លួនក្តី ក៏សហរដ្ឋអាមេរិកនៅតែអាច បន្តទាញផលចំណេញ និងមានអភ័យឯកសិទ្ធិលើសណ្តាប់ធ្នាប់សេរីនិយម។ សហរដ្ឋអាមេរិកមាន

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សេរីភាពក្នុងការធ្វើគ្រប់យ៉ាងដើម្បីការពារផលប្រយោជន៍របស់ខ្លួន ក៏ប៉ុន្តែរដ្ឋដទៃពុំមានសិទ្ធិធ្វើ
ដូច្នោះឡើយ ហើយត្រូវតែប្រកាន់ខ្ជាប់នូវសណ្តាប់ធ្នាប់ ដែលគូសវាសដោយសហរដ្ឋអាមេរិក។

Introduction

In the battle of words between the world's top governments, it may be difficult to determine who will lead the globe and if the existing international order will collapse. After World War II, the US global liberal system infiltrated gradually, and after the conclusion of the Cold War, it became clear that the liberal order would endure. However, there is considerable debate as to whether the United States can maintain this system and if the challenges of the twenty-first century will bring it to its knees. This article asserts that US hegemony is not diminishing; rather, as a rational actor, the US would work strategically to maintain its dominance. Two theories, namely hegemonic stability theory and offensive realism, will be used to test the aforementioned hypothesis. Consequently, the next part will address the ongoing dominion of the liberal order and the unfettered authority of the United States.

Theoretical Framework and the US Hegemony

This article uses the concept of soft power by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., who believes that soft power is just as important as hard power for a state's survival, to define the attributes of soft power. Although soft power is indirect and hard to notice, it is an effective and powerful source of power. Moreover, soft power is not limited to big countries or great powers. Small countries also have the potential to possess soft power. He argues that the emergence of soft power is due to five factors: economic interdependence, transnational actors, weak state nationalism, the growth of modern technology, and political issues (Nye 1990).

The US global liberal order is not diminishing soon; however, at a glance, other rising powers may seem scary, but they are yet able to scrap off the US leadership at any time soon. Hegemonic stability theory has been around for some decades. As the name suggests, the theory establishes that the world is stable when there is a hegemon capable and willing to maintain the liberal order (Webb and Krasner, 1989; Özekin, 2014). The hegemonic stability theory can explain the absence of significant or total war (Bayar and Kotelis, 2014). In other words, the theory embodies the necessity of a hegemon to have the free flow of trade and interdependence, which are essential to peace (Bussmann and Oneal, 2007). The structure of the international order is a hierarchy in which the hegemon is at the top (Ikenberry and Nexon, 2019). Of course, when doing so, the hegemon distributes international public goods, which can be in the form of economic and security contributions, which the rest can be dependent on (Yazid, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to unearth whether the liberal order is now under threat or the global order is waning. In this sense, the US' capabilities to steer the global liberal order will be seriously studied. Economic, military, political, and normative power will be considered to achieve the said goals (Ikenberry and Nexon, 2019; Skerritt, 2019). These powers will answer if the global liberal order is under threat or whether the US will still dominate it as a hegemon.

Along with this, offensive realism argues that a rational actor will pursue its interest, not only that the liberal order is not diminishing; however, the US interests will be maintained, as a hegemon, to survive and conquer (İşeri, 2009). With that said, it is natural that, as a conqueror, the US will not allow the global liberal order to be replaced. Before assessing the US

capabilities, it is vital to be familiar with the term hegemon. The definition is not unified. A hegemon can be considered an entity with supreme power over others (Skerritt, 2019). There is only one hegemon; a hegemon must be at the top, and its economic, military, political, and normative influence affects the others (Purwanti, 2018). A hegemon must have the powers cumulatively, not separately; therefore, there may be many great powers, but there can be only one hegemon (Antoniades, 2008; Dickson, 2019). The next section showcases the US' ongoing superiority in maintaining the global liberal order and neoliberalism.

The US Hegemony

This section explores US hegemony in the international system to defend its liberal order. Military, economic, and political power will be evaluated to explain US hegemony. After WWII, global liberalism became the world's dominant system. Claims of US decline are prevalent. There were criticisms and forecasts of the US declining after 9/11, the 2008 global financial crisis, the Ukraine War, Trump's protectionism, the COVID-19 outbreak, and other crises because it bypassed the liberal system (Santino and Jr, 2019; Norrlöf, 2020). However, as a deliberate player in the international arena, the US can exploit the system (Dickson, 2019). The US is immune to the global liberal order and has been free to pursue its interest, while the rest has to commit themselves to the global liberal order as pin-pointed by the US, to sustain its grand plan of supremacy (O'Connell, 2002; Skerritt, 2019).

US Military

The US has maintained its superior military might over the world after it emerged as the victor in World War II and dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan (Linden, 2010). The US' military power has contributed to securing open and uninterrupted economic activities and the core of the liberal international order (Lawless, 2020). In comparison, it is undeniable that during the Cold War, the Soviet Union had compatible weapons with the US; however, it did not last for long, and later was forced to submit to and accept economic reform according to the liberal approach (Avey, 2012; Clunan, 2018). The Soviet Union's fall has only fueled and strengthened US hegemony. Hegemons give security protection for others. That is why the US has maintained military bases on every continent. With this global presence, the US has the most money and personnel to station soldiers overseas (Üstüntağ and Atmaca, 2018).

“The United States has spent \$19 trillion on its military since the end of the Cold War....

The US military has 516 installations in 41 countries and bases in more than 80 countries.¹⁶ The United States spends \$156 billion on 800 bases in foreign countries..... US military personnel are stationed in 160 countries and has operational ground troops in more than 15 countries (Sawant, 2021).”

Moreover, the country possesses the most modern military technology. Its weapons industries are not slowing down, and military advancements are keeping the US ahead with new weapon technologies, including drones, unmanned aircraft, and precision-guided missiles (Posen, 2003). This requires up-to-date technology, money, and skill (Paarlberg, 2004). This is consistent with their massive military expenditure on administrative fees and updating deadly weaponry (Santino and Jr, 2019). In addition to the bases, the US provides security via agreements with NATO, Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and others (Costigan and Cottle, 2018; Purwanti, 2018; Skerritt, 2019). Looking at the states above verifies US presence

worldwide. In addition, the US and its allies have no trouble using forces preemptively. For example, the US has used its military force against Iraq, Libya, Syria, Cuba, and others even if these countries did not attack the US first (Karkour, 2017).

As a global security guarantor, the US may confront regional powers to sustain its supremacy. The rise of China may endanger Japan and South Korea, pushing them to align even closer with the US (Yazid, 2015). One of the potential reason which US invaded Iraq was to maintain a stable energy market for its ally, Saudi Arabia, one of the world's leading oil producers (Duffield, 2005). In Eurasian, the US is flirting with Kazakhstan, which has a large oil reserve. Negotiations between the US and Kazakhstan over an oil pipeline route to isolate Russia and the plan to station a military post in the adjacent area underscore US efforts to contain Russia and China in the region (İşeri, 2009).

The US military's capabilities and strength also surpass those of other powerful nations such as China, Russia, and the countries of the European Union. The following paragraphs will further illustrate and provide evidence for the superior prowess of the United States armed forces compared to those of other major powers. In the military realm, China has been surrounded by the US' military bases. The first and second island chain strategy deployed by the US aims at China and limits its influence in the region (Davis, Munger and Legacy, 2019). This has yet to consider the newly established AUKUS or the Quad that presents China as its core target for containment (Cannon and Rossiter, 2022). On the other hand, Chinese soldiers have reported lacking technical skills and overseas experience. Besides the military post in Djibouti, China does not have a vast network of bases like the US, which may reflect the lack of public goods that China contributes to its friends and the world (Guifang and Jie, 2019).

When it comes to Russia, some central Asian governments, as well as former Soviet Union republics, rely on Russia for security, notably through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Yet, former Soviet governments such as the Baltic State, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan departed the organisation, partially due to Russia's inability to deliver sufficient armaments, thereby allowing the west and NATO to include some them in their organization instead (Stratievski, 2023). On the contrary, Russia is also under threat from the west and not vice versa. Russia feels left out as the EU and the US contain it, especially with the latter involvement in central Asia. For instance, a fault promises to Russia and NATO enlargement singled out that liberal order is moving to isolate Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014; Slobodchikoff, 2017). If Ukraine falls into the EU and US' realm, it will be security concerns for Moscow, and Russia's economic and political influence in the region will be significantly diminished (Slobodchikoff, 2017).

At the same time, the EU's security depends on the US, especially within NATO, financially and staffing (Demetriou, 2016). The EU has been reluctant to challenge Russia alone, and the same can be said with limited activities in the Middle East (Smith and Youngs, 2018). Most of the time, the EU bandwagons with the US in military operation oversea and depends on the US for its internal security (Smith and Youngs, 2018). In much of its progress, the US remains essential as its economic and security guarantor.

US Economic

The US' second power corridor is economic. The economy has helped retain US dominance alongside the military. Post-WW II, the US formed the Bretton Woods system, which the globe followed. Organisations such as the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank control global trade, commercial, and fiscal and monetary policy. These institutions have accepted neoliberalism, which requires trade openness, unhindered commodities, services movement, and lower tariffs and taxes (Chornyy, 2011). Some contend that such institutions help the US capitalist system, not emerging or impoverished countries (Wade, 2002). The opening border implies that industrialised countries may import raw commodities and sell them to emerging nations for profit (Ciccantell, 2019). These liberalisation norms are now overseen by the aforementioned authorities. Due to its weight in the IMF and World Bank voting system, it is hard to claim that neoliberalism will be changed or whether US interests will be damaged, given that the US holds the greatest voting power in these international organisations (Heinzel *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the US dollar is still the world's most valuable and widely traded currency. When nations utilise the dollar, the US may impact their economy, particularly when adjusting the dollar's inflation rate (Costigan, Cottle and Keys, 2017).

On the contrary, the US has guaranteed the cheap and continuous supply of oil from the middle east, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia via ten-year contracts for 350 billion dollars, and it is paid in US dollars, the US dollar's value will not drop (Costigan and Cottle, 2018). Meanwhile, oil commodities and US dollars remain crucial to the US hegemony.

Additionally, the US is an important export market for emerging nations, including China (Strange, 1987; Wang, 2010). Overdependence on the US for financial assistance and commerce may result from US imports. The EU and Japan are also protecting this liberal order with the US. Post-WWII, the US committed resources to build up Germany, Japan, and the EU's economies, which became US allies (Yazid, 2015). The EU and Japan have become strong economic powers, and such progress will also benefit the US (Ikenberry, 2005).

On the other hand, Russia and China have followed the US' public goods of economic liberalism (Stephen and Skidmore, 2020). Not only do these nations engage in U.S.-created international liberal institutions, but their programs, such as the AIIB or BRICs, are not in contrast to the liberal international order (Nuruzzaman, 2020). Without the provision of international public goods by the US, such programmes may not last (Costigan and Cottle, 2018). Lastly, the US is also a major aid contributor and investor for the undeveloped (Webb and Krasner, 1989).

“In 2022, the United States continued to be the largest DAC member provider of ODA (USD 55.3 billion), comprising more than a quarter of total DAC ODA, followed by Germany (USD 35.0 billion), Japan (USD 17.5 billion), France (USD 15.9 billion) and the United Kingdom (USD 15.7 billion) (OECD, 2023).”

I will reflect the US's economic superiority with other three powers (China, Russia, and EU) to further illustrates the gap among them. On the economic front, there is no doubt that China has become the second biggest economy in the world. Yet, China's leapfrog economic progress is due to its dependence on the liberal order, and the US market remains China's crucial source of income (Xing and Bernal-Meza, 2021). It is true that China has established projects such as the silk road and is a member of BRICs. However, it remains to be seen if the projects would be able to challenge or even replace the neoliberal economic order due to members disunity, lack of comprehensive structure, and the dependence on the US's manufactured liberal order (Costigan and Cottle, 2018; Nuruzzaman, 2020).

To put in a perspective, the US's economic might and its dollar remains superior even against China which will be illustrated below:

“In overall transactions related to not just trade but also finance, the RMB accounted for just 2.4 per cent of global payments in September 2022, far behind not only the dollar but also the euro and sterling...the dollar accounts for almost 90 per cent of turnover on global foreign exchange markets, the renminbi accounts for just 4 per cent... Chinese has emerged as a major international lender..... however, most of its lending and investment to date has been in dollars (Eichengreen *et al.*, 2022)”

On the other hand, China and Russia has been seen to not shared an align vision with the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the friction between the silk road project in central Asia versus the Eurasia Economic partnership (Wilson, 2017). In a sense, although China's economic progress positively affects globally, it does not equip to be a hegemon nor a solid threat to the liberal approach as of now. If anything, China's peaceful rise needs the liberal order to flourish.

Like China, Russia's attitude, especially with the normative standard, follows the liberal order route. Economic-wise, the sanctions imposed on Russia since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine affected the economy massively, and the new sanction is no different now (Benzell and Lagarda, 2017; Kumagai *et al.*, 2022). The US-led economic sanctions have damaged the targeted state. Since 2014, when Russia's economy was sanctioned for the Ukraine incursion, it has fallen to -0.2% yearly (Korhonen, 2019). Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that Russia is yet capable of taking over this liberal world. Instead, Russia would prefer to maintain the status quo; however, it is threatened and concerned that the liberal order will continue to enlarge and consume Russia and its influence.

Nonetheless, a handful of states have turned from Russia to the EU for protection simply due to economic reasons that link to the security apparatus (Wilson, 2017). With that said, as for the EU economic front, it is important to note that the EU liberal order prosper when the US conducted the recovery project after world war II to kick start economic development and turn the EU into the US orbit (Güngör, 2013; Ikenberry and Nexon, 2019). With this, EU's economy is not superior due to the following examples, the financial crisis of 2008 and the Ukraine crisis affects the EU's economic progress; on the other hand, their involvement in the middle east

and Africa in economic subsidies is not outstanding (Langan, 2015; Smith and Youngs, 2018). Internal fragmentation between member states and Brexit further crippled the EU to stand out as the liberal order championed (Newman, 2018).

This goes to show the US economic strength worldwide.

US Political and Normative Power

The US' liberal order maintains a tight grip over political and normative control of the world. As a hegemon, the US can influence the world with democracy, human rights, and other normative standards (Choi and James, 2016). As mentioned earlier, the US is the archetype of the world system but may not be bound by it (O'Connell, 2002). The US played a prominent role in creating the League of Nations and then the United Nations, in which the notion of democracy and human rights have been incorporated (Mende, 2021). Accepting these values as universal reflects the US' ability to use its ideology and politics to induce or influence others (Hassan and Ralph, 2011).

According to the third-world approach to international law, the hegemon produces international law and normative norms to benefit itself (Mutua, 2000). In Iraq, Libya, Cuba, and other cases, the US has utilised human rights to conduct regime change by passing international law (İşeri, 2009; Karkour, 2017; Skerritt, 2019). Hegemons may also affect underdeveloped countries by implementing unequal treaties. The US employed gunboat diplomacy to compel China into an unequal treaty in the past, and it sidestepped the law on the use of force, its doubtful involvement with the Paris climate agreement, and its immunity from the International Criminal Courts (Chibueze, 2003; Karoubi, 2005; Han, 2018; Chestnoy and Gershinkova, 2019). While often time the US investment agreement model has been standardized as international law, the US often time act unilaterally and violated the law to protect its own interest, for example, (Miles, 2013). These instances highlight the US exception from the legal and normative approach; instead, problems like the environment, human rights, and corruption are used to exert pressure on others (Gonzalez, 2015).

In addition, the US has the normative and political power to influence others, particularly at the societal level. For instance, globalisation has spawned NGOs and MNCs that spread liberal principles to other countries, if not the globe (Simmons, Dobbin. and Garrett, 2006). American English has penetrated global civilisation, becoming a norm for communication (Skerritt, 2019). With the globalisation of mass media, American culture has blossomed not just in the third world but also among its allies, such as the UK (Ostendorf, 2002; Skerritt, 2019). The US is seen as the land of the free, while the categorisation of rogue states is those that do not share its policies and objectives.

The analysis of the current global landscape reveals the United States' unparalleled political and normative dominance. Furthermore, this dominance is accentuated when contrasted with the other three major powers—China, Russia, and the European Union—underscoring the significant disparity between the US and its counterparts in terms of their ability to shape

international norms and exert political influence on a global scale. China's political system is not similar to those in the occidental region, and it adopted a socialist/communist system and is a subject of criticism from the occidental community (Tsang and Cheung, 2021). It is doubtful if China can influence the international system as similar to the US' liberal order. Not only because the US liberal order is popular and painted the communist as illiberal, but China faces severe internal challenges that the occidental outsider mainly stirs (Zhao, 2010; Hackenesch and Bader, 2020). Its territories are subjected to interference from the US, especially under the pretext of democracy and human rights, for example, in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. China has been criticised for environmental issues, human rights, the South China Sea, and others by the occidentals, making it hard for China to establish itself as a rule-maker to triumph the intentional order (Roland, 2021). This may explain that China is yet to be able to set normative standards and legitimacy for others to follow. Besides the US, China does not yet possess the power to alter international law or norms led by the US (Sornarajah and Wang, 2019). The media and other international entities have significant roles in downgrading China's credibility and selling it to the international community (Yang and Liu, 2012; Armel, 2021). Having said that, what may be a crucial norm-setting instrument, the Belt and Road Initiative, has been greatly reduced by COVID-19 owing to financial hardship both before and after the epidemic (Mouritz, 2020). This will, to some extent, lessen China's leverage or competitive advantage over the existing liberal economic system of the West.

On the other hand, democracy and human rights again, similar to China, infiltrated Russia's domestic system, which created protest and was prone to the color revolution (Bunce, 2017). Russia remains vocal for the liberal order based on law, and existing arrangements and legal agreements in the region also confirm Russia's submission to the existing order, such as the Helsinki Act which Russia does not challenge the order but would commit to further working with the liberal world and superpowers (Slobodchikoff, 2017).

Finally, looking at the EU is almost like a reflection of the US, as they are both an active player in safeguarding the liberal order. The EU differs from the above two rising powers since it is not a threat to the liberal order but rather a protector (Szewczyk, 2019). Some view that the US is deviating from the current order, and episodic unilateralism question its leading role in the world and whether the EU can fill in the role (Didier, 2021). This article argues that the US' occasional unilateralism is to strengthen its liberal order and take advantage of the situation to maintain its hegemony according to offensive realism. In addition, the EU is not in the panicle to replace the US as a global leader (Ikenberry, 2004).

Questioning the US Hegemony

The US' legitimacy has been questioned, although the case may be weak. In economic, military, political, and legal domains, the US has occasionally been unilateral. The trade war with China during the Trump era, the unilateral use of force in the Middle East, the withdrawal from the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement, the threat against the International Criminal Court, or the lack of willingness to ratify the UNCLOS show the US

has limited constraints (Duff, 2006; Chestnoy and Gershinkova, 2019; Gostin *et al.*, 2020). This article views that the US applies double standards, exclusions, and exemptions to the international order. Because as a hegemon, it can. The US will do whatever to retain its unchallenged status (Ikenberry, 2003).

The US offers public goods to the globe and its allies. The Bretton Woods System preserves economic openness, while the US military ensures global security. The article challenges the US citizen's internal restriction for its global supremacy for two reasons. First, the following part explains that US internal restraint is not rare, but the democratic and embedded liberal value save the US from pressure, and the US citizen impacted less by their own foreign policy. Therefore, the US' international system has always been extraordinary, while internal pressure cannot affect US foreign policy (Parmar, 2012; Jacobs and Page, 2014).

According to Jacobs and Page's survey and data analysis,

“None of the four models [Analysis of four kinds of regression models] indicated any clearly significant public influence on the administration, the main center for foreign policy decision making (Jacobs and Page, 2014).”

Second, US interference and the so-called colour revolution as a threat in Russia and China have been more severe and troublesome (Wilson and Kraska, 2009). The three powers (China, Russia, and EU) are not capable of threatening the liberal order in the foreseeable future as illustrated in section III above.

Conclusion

Simply stated, the United States' hegemony remains strong. There may be modern obstacles caused by internal and foreign threats to the US, but the liberal system enables the country to stand apart from others. In other words, the US liberal order is a public good and a normative model for the rest of the world to follow, but the US enjoys major benefits from this and may diverge from the liberal order to further its interests. The hegemonic stability hypothesis indicates that the hegemon provides liberal order as a public goods, enhancing their economic, military, political, and normative powers. According to offensive realism, the US will maintain its hegemony as a strategic player. It is unlikely that other aspirant big powers would replace the United States or even the liberal order since both are crucial to the survival and maintenance of the system and its interests.

The opinions expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.

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