

CHAPTER 3 US DOMINANCE IN WORLD POLITICS

INTRODUCTION

The **end of the Cold War** marked the emergence of the United States as the world's sole superpower, ushering in an era often characterised by US dominance or a unipolar world. This chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of this dominance, exploring its nature, scope, and limitations. It begins by tracing the evolution of the new world order, focusing on pivotal events such as the **First Gulf War**, the **US response to 9/11**, and the **subsequent invasion of Iraq**. These events underscore the growth of unilateralism and the assertive role of the US in global politics. The chapter then delves into the **concept of 'hegemony'** to better understand the multifaceted nature of US dominance, examining its political, economic, and cultural dimensions. It discusses how hegemony, while central to US global influence, also faces significant challenges. The analysis includes a look at the ideological and economic dominance of the US, along with its impact on global dynamics. In addition, the chapter explores **India's evolving relationship with the United States**, highlighting India's strategic choices in negotiating its position amidst US dominance. The discussion culminates in an evaluation of whether US hegemony is encountering substantial challenges and how it might be contested in the future. Through this examination, the chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of US dominance, its implications for global politics, and the responses it provokes from major international actors.



What is the meaning of America

The term 'America' as it is commonly understood to refer to the United States of America (USA or US). However, it's important to remember that 'America' actually encompasses both North and South America, and the US is just one of the many countries on these continents. Therefore, the exclusive use of 'America' to describe the US is already an indication of the US's dominance.

TOPICS COVERED

- ✓ **Growth of unilateralism:** Afghanistan, first Gulf War, response to 9/11 and attack on Iraq.
- ✓ **Dominance and challenge to the US in economy and ideology.**
- ✓ **India's renegotiation of its relationship with the USA.**

BEGINNING OF THE 'NEW WORLD ORDER: GROWTH OF UNILATERALISM'

SOVIET INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN (1979-1989)

1. **Soviet Intervention:** In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to support its communist government, which was struggling against internal resistance from insurgent groups known as the **Mujahideen**. The Soviet Union wanted to maintain a socialist-friendly regime in Afghanistan as part of its strategy to secure influence in Central Asia and counterbalance Western powers.



2. **Afghan Resistance and Mujahideen:** The Mujahideen, made up of various tribal, Islamist, and anti-communist factions, opposed the Soviet-backed government. They fought a guerrilla war against Soviet forces. These fighters were seen as freedom fighters by some and insurgents by others.

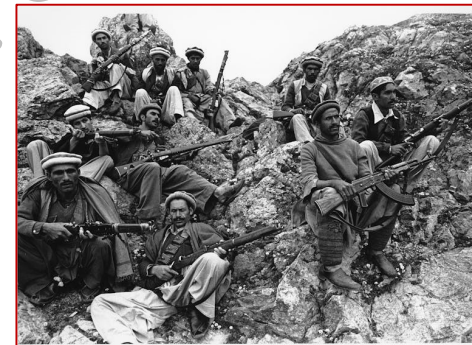


3. **US Involvement:** The USA, viewing the Soviet invasion as a direct expansion of communist influence during the Cold War, covertly supported the Mujahideen. Under a secret CIA operation known as **Operation Cyclone**, the U.S. funnelled weapons, training, and financial aid to the Afghan rebels. The U.S., along with allies like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China, provided substantial support, making the Afghan-Soviet conflict a **proxy war** in the Cold War context.



4. **Impact on the Soviet Union:** The war in Afghanistan became a costly quagmire for the Soviet Union, often compared to the U.S. experience in Vietnam. The prolonged conflict, mounting Soviet casualties, and economic strain contributed to domestic dissatisfaction and weakened the Soviet regime. By 1989, under **Mikhail Gorbachev's** leadership, Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan, marking the beginning of the end for Soviet influence in the region.

POST-SOVIET ERA AND RISE OF THE TALIBAN (1990S): After the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan descended into civil war. Various Mujahideen factions fought for control, but none could establish a stable government. In the power vacuum, the **Taliban**, a hardline Islamist group, emerged, taking control of Kabul in 1996. They imposed a strict interpretation of Sharia law and provided a safe haven for international terrorists like Al-Qaeda. **The Soviet failure in Afghanistan contributed to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.**



COLLAPSE OF SOVIET UNION AND USA's HEGEMONIC RISE

The sudden **collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991** was unexpected, leaving the United States as the sole remaining superpower, with its influence not only intact but even strengthened. This suggests that **US hegemony began after the Soviet Union's fall in 1991, which is mostly accurate.** However, there are two important points to consider. First, **certain aspects of US dominance actually date back to the end of the Second World War in 1945.** Second, **the US did not immediately start acting as a hegemonic power in 1991;** it only became evident later that the world had entered a period of US hegemony. To understand this better, we need to examine how US hegemony was gradually established.

In **August 1990, Iraq invaded and quickly took control of Kuwait, later annexing it.** When diplomatic efforts to persuade Iraq to withdraw failed, the United Nations authorized the use of force to liberate Kuwait. This marked a significant and dramatic move for the UN, which had been largely paralyzed by Cold War divisions for years. **US President George H.W. Bush (pic right next**

page) declared this as the dawn of a 'new world order.' A formidable coalition of 660,000 troops from 34 countries fought against Iraq, ultimately defeating it in what became known as the **First Gulf War**. However, the **UN-led mission, termed 'Operation Desert Storm,'** was predominantly American in nature. The coalition was **commanded by American General Norman Schwarzkopf,** with nearly 75 percent of the troops being from the United States. Despite **Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's vow of "the mother of all battles,"** the Iraqi forces were swiftly defeated and compelled to withdraw from Kuwait.



The **First Gulf War** exposed the significant technological advantage the US military had over other nations. The US's prominent use of 'smart bombs' led some to label it a 'computer war.' Additionally, extensive television coverage turned it into a 'video game war,' as people worldwide watched the live destruction of Iraqi forces from the comfort of their homes. Astonishingly, the US might have even profited from the war. Numerous reports suggest that the US received more financial contributions from countries like Germany, Japan, and Saudi Arabia than it actually spent on the conflict.

THE CLINTON YEARS

Despite the victory in the First Gulf War, **George H.W. Bush lost the 1992 US presidential election to Democrat William Jefferson (Bill) Clinton (pic right),** who had focused his campaign on domestic issues rather than foreign policy. Clinton won re-election in 1996, **-serving as president for eight years.** During his presidency, the US often appeared more focused on domestic affairs and less involved in global politics. **Clinton's foreign policy emphasized 'soft issues' like promoting democracy, addressing climate change, and advancing world trade, rather than the 'hard politics' of military power and security.**



Despite its focus on softer issues, the US demonstrated a willingness to use military power during the Clinton years. A significant example occurred in **1999** when **Yugoslavia targeted the predominantly Albanian population in Kosovo.** In response, NATO forces, led by the US, launched an air campaign against Yugoslavian targets that lasted over two months. This bombardment ultimately led to the downfall of Slobodan Milosevic's government and the deployment of NATO forces in Kosovo.



Another notable US military action during the Clinton years occurred in **response to the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania.** These attacks were linked to Al-Qaeda, a terrorist group driven by extremist Islamist ideologies. Just days after the bombings, President Clinton launched Operation Infinite Reach, which involved a series of cruise missile strikes on Al-Qaeda targets in Sudan and Afghanistan. The

US acted without seeking UN approval or adhering to international law, and some targets were later alleged to be civilian facilities unrelated to terrorism. In hindsight, this marked only the beginning of a broader conflict.

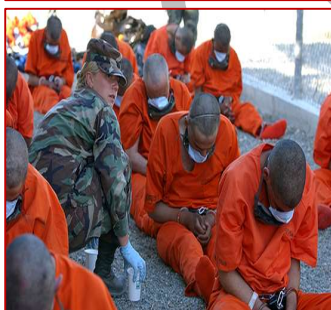
9/11 AND THE 'GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR'

On 11 September 2001, nineteen hijackers from various Arab countries took control of four American commercial flights shortly after take-off and crashed them into key US buildings. Two of the aircraft struck the North and South Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, while a third crashed into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, home to the US Department of Défense. The fourth plane, which was likely headed for the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., ended up crashing into a field in Pennsylvania. These attacks, known as "9/11," are referred to with the month preceding the day in American notation, hence '9/11' rather than '11/9' as used in India.

The 9/11 attacks resulted in the deaths of nearly three thousand people. In terms of their impact on Americans, they have been compared to the British burning of



Figure 1: Attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, New York, September 11, 2001



Washington, DC in 1814 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. However, in terms of the scale of loss of life, 9/11 was the deadliest attack on US soil since the nation's founding in 1776. The US response to 9/11 was swift and intense. **George W. Bush** (pic left), the Republican successor to Bill Clinton and the son of former President **George H. W. Bush**, took a much more assertive stance on US interests and the methods to achieve them. As part of the 'Global War on Terror,' the US initiated 'Operation Enduring Freedom' targeting those responsible for the attacks, primarily Al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. While the Taliban was quickly overthrown, remnants of both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda have remained active, as evidenced by continued terrorist attacks against Western targets. US forces conducted arrests globally, frequently without informing the governments of the individuals being detained and transported across countries and held in secret prisons. Some were taken to **Guantanamo Bay**, a US Naval base in Cuba, where they were denied the protections of international law and the legal systems of their own countries or the US. Additionally, UN representatives were not permitted to meet with these detainees.

USA-AFGHANISTAN WAR (2001-PRESENT)

1. **9/11 Attacks and U.S. Invasion:** After the 9/11 attacks orchestrated by Al-Qaeda, the U.S. demanded the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda. When the Taliban refused, the U.S., supported by NATO allies, launched **Operation Enduring**

Freedom in 2001, toppling the Taliban government. This led to a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

2. **Nation-Building Efforts:** The U.S. and its allies attempted to rebuild Afghanistan by establishing a democratic government and training Afghan security forces. However, persistent corruption, weak governance, and the resurgence of the Taliban undermined these efforts.
3. **Withdrawal and Taliban Return:** In 2020, the U.S. signed a peace agreement with the Taliban, and by 2021, U.S. forces withdrew from Afghanistan. Shortly after the withdrawal, the Taliban regained control of the country, marking a dramatic end to two decades of U.S. involvement.

THE IRAQ INVASION

On 19 March 2003, the US began its invasion of Iraq under the name 'Operation Iraqi Freedom.' Over forty other countries joined the US-led 'coalition of the willing' after the UN refused to authorise the invasion. The stated goal was to prevent Iraq from developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, with no evidence of WMD found in Iraq, it is suspected that the invasion was driven by other motives, such as gaining control over Iraqi oilfields and installing a pro-US regime. Although Saddam Hussein's government was quickly overthrown, the US struggled to stabilize Iraq. Instead, the invasion sparked a full-scale insurgency against US forces. The US military has lost over 3,000 personnel, while Iraqi civilian casualties are significantly higher, with estimates of around 50,000 deaths since the invasion. It is now widely acknowledged that the US invasion of Iraq was a significant failure both militarily and politically.



Figure 2: The "Highway of Death" refers to the US bombing of retreating Iraqi forces during the Gulf War, criticized as a war crime.

WHAT DOES HEGEMONY MEAN?

Politics revolves around power. Just as individuals seek to acquire and maintain power, groups and nations do the same. In global politics, countries and alliances are perpetually striving to gain and maintain power, which can manifest as military dominance, economic strength, political influence, and cultural superiority. To understand world politics, it is crucial to grasp the distribution of power among nations. For example, during the Cold War (1945-1991), global power was split between two major blocs, with the US and the Soviet Union as the dominant 'camps' or centres of power. **The Soviet Union's collapse left the world with a single superpower, hyperpower, the United States.** This situation is sometimes referred to as a 'unipolar' system, though

this use of 'pole' from physics might be misleading. A more accurate term might be 'hegemony,' which describes an international system with a single centre of power. There are three distinct interpretations of hegemony. Let's explore each of these interpretations and how they apply to contemporary international politics.

HEGEMONY AS HARD POWER

The term 'hegemony' has its origins in classical Greek, where it referred to the leadership or dominance of one state over others. Initially, it described Athens' superior position among the city-states of ancient Greece. In modern contexts, hegemony often signifies a state's military pre-eminence relative to others; the relations, patterns and balances of military capability between states. This concept of hegemony as military dominance is particularly relevant to understanding the current global role of the US. The foundation of contemporary US power is its unparalleled military superiority. The US exhibits both absolute and relative military dominance. In absolute terms, it possesses the capability to strike any location on the globe with precision, lethality, and immediacy, effectively neutralising adversaries while keeping its own forces as safe as possible from the dangers of conflict.

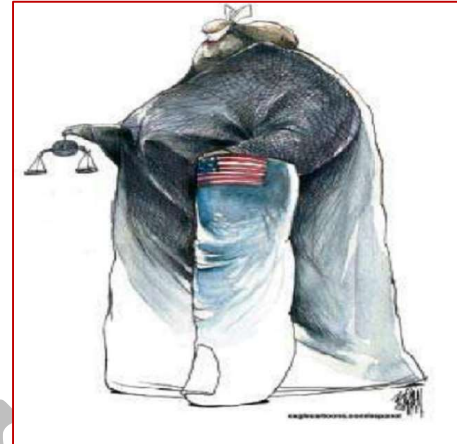


Figure 3: 'Under US Thumb', commonsensical understanding of what

Even more impressive than the sheer capabilities of the US military is the fact that no other nation can come close to matching them. The US currently invests more in its military than the next twelve largest military spenders combined. A significant portion of the Pentagon's budget is dedicated to military research and development, focusing on advanced technology. Consequently, US military dominance is not just a result of higher spending but also reflects a substantial qualitative and technological gap that other powers currently cannot bridge.

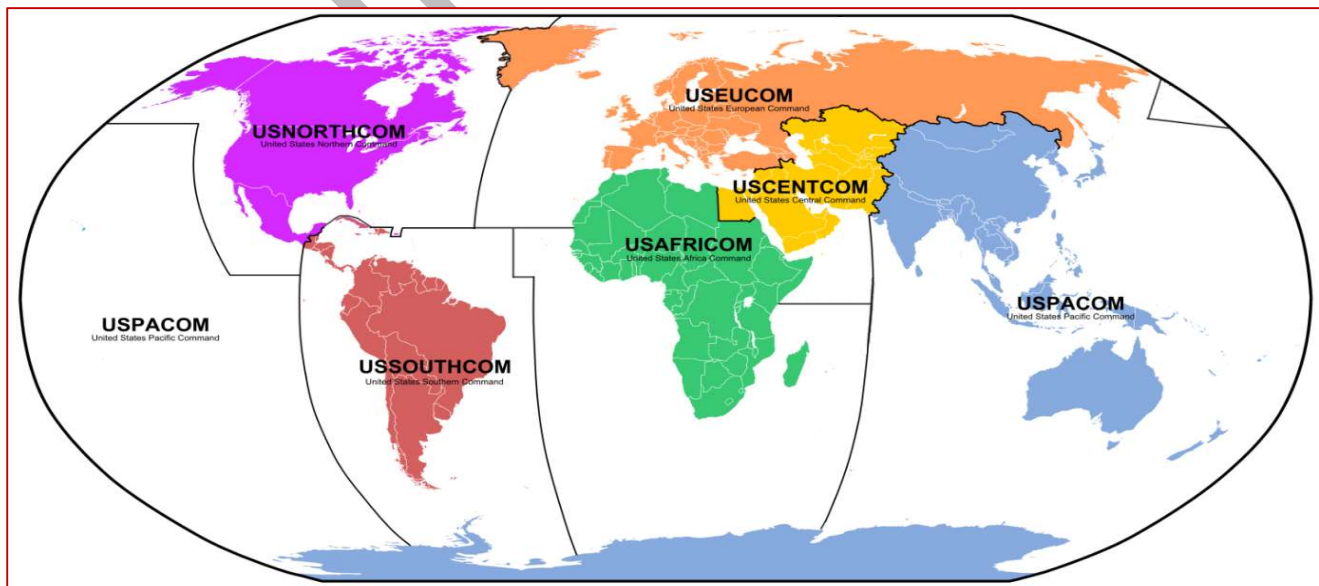


Figure 4: US Navy Area Responsibility

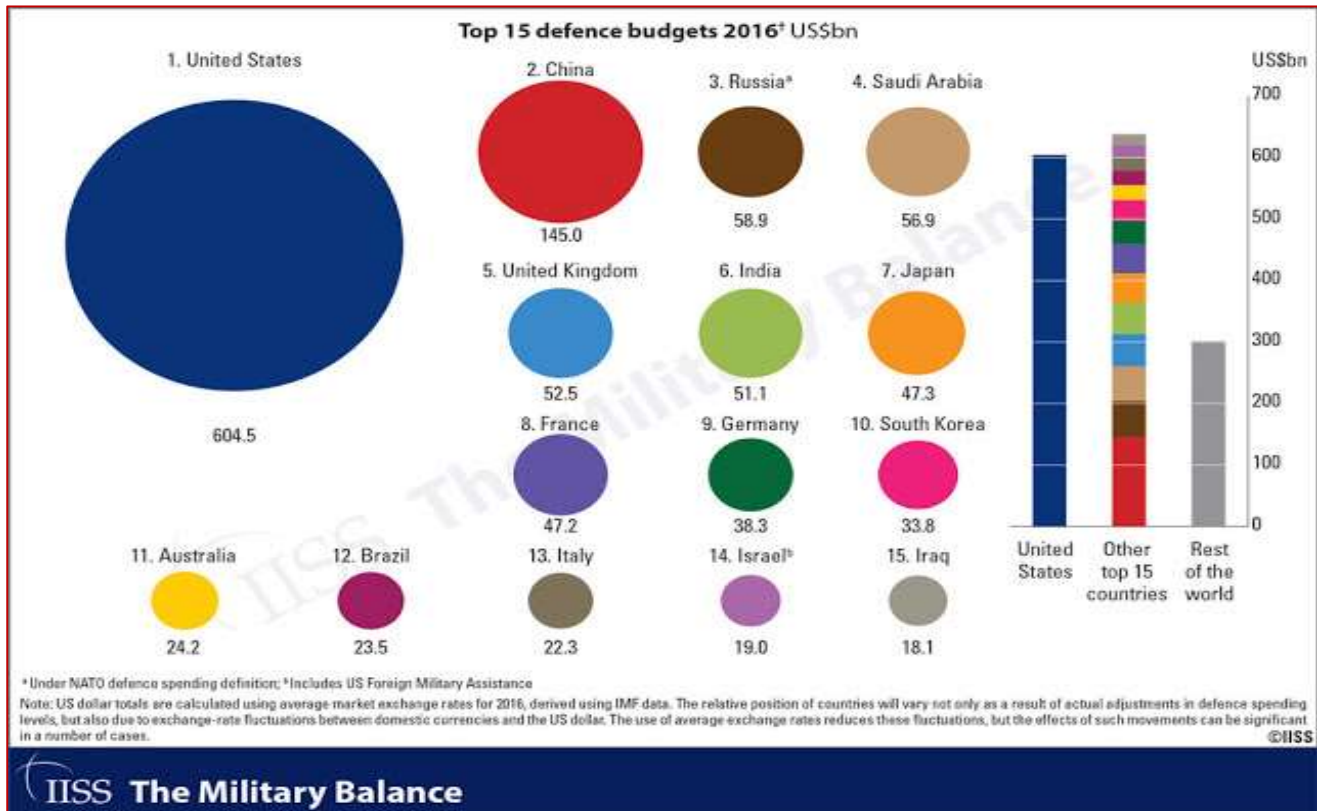


Figure 5: The US spends more on military than the next 12 nations combined. Most top spenders are US allies, making balance hard.

The US invasion of Iraq highlights several vulnerabilities in American power. Despite its significant military strength, the US has struggled to compel the Iraqi population to accept the occupation forces. To fully grasp the nature of American weaknesses, it's important to consider historical patterns of imperial powers. **Historically, imperial forces have used military might for four primary purposes: conquest, deterrence, punishment, and policing.** The invasion of Iraq demonstrates that the US excels in conquest, deterrence, and punishment. However, its ability to effectively police and manage an occupied territory has proven to be a significant challenge.

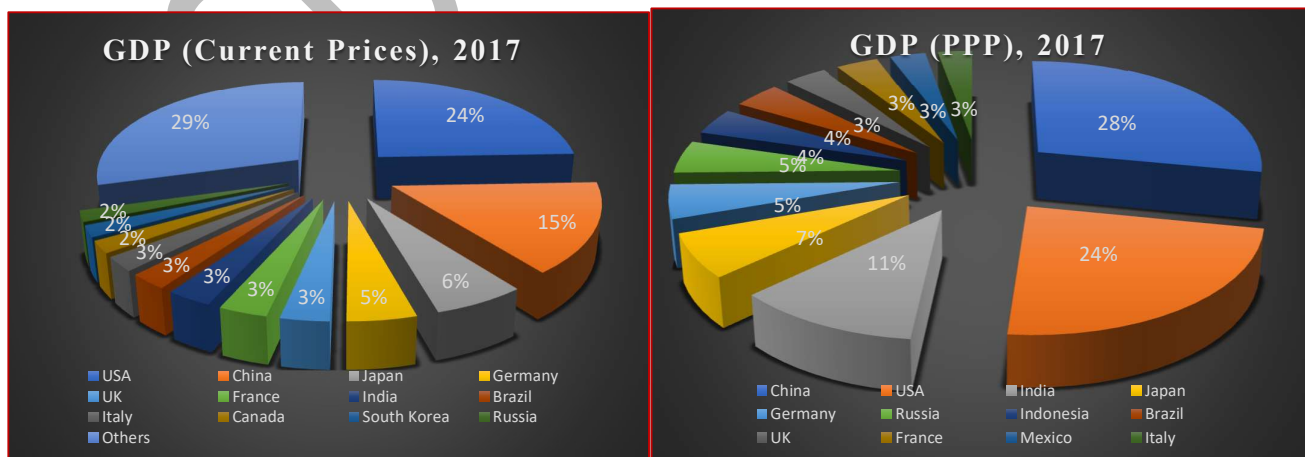


Chart Detail: The US has the world's largest economy, but faces strong competitors. This is evident when comparing economies using Purchasing Power Parity (PPP).

HEGEMONY AS STRUCTURAL POWER

The second concept of hegemony diverges significantly from the first and is rooted in the dynamics of the global economy. According to this view, a functioning open world economy relies on a dominant power or hegemon to create and maintain its global structure. A hegemon must have both the capability and willingness to set and enforce global norms, which benefits it but also incurs costs that competitors avoid while still reaping the rewards of an open economy.

In this second sense, hegemony is evident in the role the US plays in providing global public goods. Public goods are those that one person can use without diminishing their availability to others, such as fresh air or roads. In the global economy, a prime example of a public good is the sea-lanes of communication (SLOCs), which are vital maritime routes used by commercial ships. For free trade to thrive in an open world economy, the maintenance of open SLOCs is essential, illustrating the US's role in ensuring these crucial global resources remain accessible.

The naval power of the hegemon is crucial for upholding maritime laws and ensuring freedom of navigation in international waters. Since British naval dominance declined after World War II, the extensive U.S. Navy has taken on the role of maintaining open sea-lanes and enforcing maritime regulations. Another example of a global public good is the Internet. While it now enables the virtual world of the World Wide Web, it's important to remember that the Internet originated from a US military research project that began in the 1950s. Today, it continues to depend on a global network of satellites, the majority of which are owned by the US government.

The US maintains a pervasive presence across the globe, encompassing all sectors of the world economy and technological fields. It holds a significant 24% share of the global economy. Additionally, it represents nearly 14% of world trade, including intra-European Union trade.

THE BRETTON WOODS SYSTEM (1944): A post-World War II monetary system establishing fixed exchange rates with the U.S. dollar as the central reserve currency. The U.S. played a dominant role in shaping the system.

THE WORLD BANK (1944): Founded at the Bretton Woods Conference, it provides financial and technical assistance to developing countries. The U.S. is the largest shareholder, significantly influencing its policies.

THE INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND (IMF) (1944): Created at Bretton Woods to promote global monetary cooperation and financial stability. The U.S. holds the largest quota and has considerable influence over its decisions.

WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION (WTO) (1995): Established to regulate international trade and ensure trade flows smoothly. The U.S., as a major economy, plays a critical role in shaping global trade policies within the WTO framework.



In the Soviet Union, blue jeans symbolized Western allure and liberation. Many young Soviets spent a year's salary on black market jeans, seeing them as symbols of the "good life" unattainable in their country. This highlights how simple cultural symbols can embody broader aspirations. During the Cold War, while the U.S. struggled in direct military competition, it excelled in soft power. Despite the Soviet Union's alternative economic model, the global economy remained capitalist. American cultural influence, exemplified by blue jeans, created a generational shift in Soviet societal values, contributing to U.S. success in the Cold War.

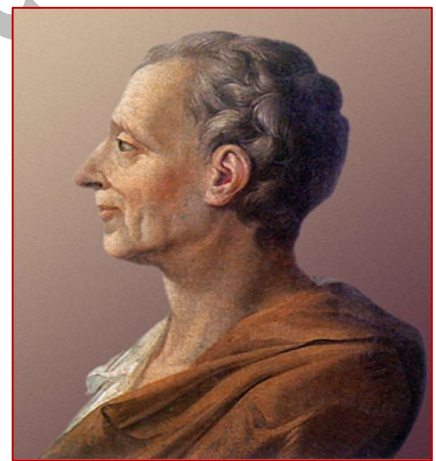
CONSTRAINTS ON AMERICAN POWER

History shows that empires often decline due to internal decay. The main limitations on American hegemony are internal to the hegemony itself. Initially, these three constraints seemed to be inactive in the years following 9/11. However, it now seems that all three constraints are gradually becoming significant once more.

1. The **first constraint is the structure of the American government (institutional architecture of the American state)**. The **separation of powers** among the three branches of government imposes significant limits on the executive branch's unchecked use of military power.
2. The **second constraint is domestic and arises from the openness of American society**. Despite occasional influence from the mass media on public opinion, there is a strong skepticism about government actions in American political culture. This skepticism acts as
 1. a significant constraint on the US's ability to engage in military actions abroad over the long term.
 2. The **third constraint, and arguably the most significant, is the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)**. As the only international body capable of moderating American power, NATO plays a crucial role. The US has a vested interest in maintaining this alliance of democratic, market-oriented nations, which means NATO allies could influence and temper the exercise of US hegemony.

SEPARATION OF POWER

The concept of **separation of powers**, attributed to **Montesquieu** in "*The Spirit of the Laws*" (1748), divides governmental authority among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches to prevent the concentration of power, ensure checks and balances, and protect individual liberties.



INDIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE US

During the Cold War, India's closest friendship was with the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, India faced a friendless position in a more adversarial global landscape. At the same time, India embarked on economic liberalisation, integrating with the global economy. This shift, along with impressive economic growth, has made India a valuable economic partner for various countries, including the US. In recent years, two significant factors have shaped Indo-US relations: technological collaboration and the influence of the Indian-American diaspora. These factors are interconnected. Notable points include:



1. The US accounts for approximately 65% of India's software exports.
2. Around 35% of Boeing's technical staff are of Indian origin.
3. About 300,000 Indians are employed in Silicon Valley.
4. Indian-Americans are behind 15% of all high-tech start-ups.

India must now determine the nature of its relationship with the US amidst its global dominance. The options are complex, with ongoing debates within India focusing on three potential strategies. Indian analysts who view international politics through a military lens are concerned about the deepening relationship between India and the US. They advocate for India to remain distant from Washington and concentrate on enhancing its own comprehensive national power.

Other analysts view the increasing alignment of interests between the US and India as a historic chance for India. They support a strategy that leverages US hegemony and shared interests to maximize India's benefits. They argue that opposing the US would be a counterproductive approach that could harm India in the long term. A third group of analysts suggests that India should spearhead the creation of a coalition of developing countries. Over time, this coalition could gain strength and potentially persuade the hegemon to moderate its dominance. Given the complexity of India-US relations, a single strategy may not be sufficient. India needs to adopt a nuanced mix of foreign policy approaches to effectively navigate its relationship with the US.

HOW CAN HEGEMONY BE OVERCOME?

The duration of hegemony and the path beyond it are pressing questions in today's world. History offers intriguing insights into these issues, but the present and future remain uncertain. Unlike national governments, there is no global authority that enforces limits on military power. International organizations do not equate to world government, and while laws of war impose certain restrictions, they do not fully prevent conflict. Thus, **international politics is 'politics without government'**. Consequently, many states remain cautious and do not rely solely on international law for their security. This raises the question: is there no way out of the cycle of war and hegemony? In the short term, no single power is close to matching US military strength. Moreover, forming a military coalition to challenge the US is improbable due to the significant differences among major countries like China, India, and Russia, which all have the potential to contest US hegemony.

Some argue that it is more strategic to leverage the opportunities created by hegemony. For example, enhancing economic growth often requires increased trade, technology transfers, and investment, which are more effectively achieved by collaborating with the hegemon rather than

BANDWAGON STRATEGY

The **bandwagon strategy** leverages the perception of growing popularity to persuade people to join or support a candidate, product, or idea by suggesting that it is the prevailing choice. In the context of U.S. hegemony, the **bandwagon strategy** involves countries aligning with the U.S. or adopting its policies and values to gain favour, security, or economic benefits, driven by the perception of U.S. dominance and influence on the global stage.



opposing it. This approach, known as the ‘bandwagon’ strategy, suggests that **working within the hegemonic system to reap its benefits may be more advantageous than confronting it.** Another strategy for states is to ‘hide’, meaning to stay as detached from the dominant power as possible. Countries like China, Russia, and the European Union often adopt this approach to avoid provoking the US. While this strategy might work for smaller states, it is less feasible for major powers like China, India, or Russia, as well as large entities like the EU, to remain under the radar for an extended period.

Some argue that resistance to American hegemony might not come from other states, which currently lack the power to confront the US, but from non-state actors. Challenges could arise in the economic and cultural spheres, driven by NGOs, social movements, public opinion, and various intellectuals, artists, media and writers. These groups might collaborate across borders, including with Americans, to critique and resist US policies. As the saying goes, we live in a ‘global village,’ where everyone is essentially a neighbour



of the dominant power. If the headman’s behaviour becomes unbearable, leaving this global village isn’t an option, making resistance the only viable response.

WHAT DOES HISTORY TEACH US ABOUT HEGEMONY?

The logic of balance of power in international politics and relations makes hegemony uncommon because, without a global government, each state must safeguard its own security and survival. States are therefore vigilant about power distribution and generally prevent any single state from becoming too dominant and threatening others. Historically, the **idea of balance of power, where no single state dominates indefinitely, is well-supported.** Since the emergence of sovereign territorial states as principal actor in world politics in 1648, **only two states have achieved dominance comparable to the US today: France from 1660 to 1713 in Europe, and Britain from 1860 to 1910 globally.**

However, such dominance is not permanent. Over time, other powers challenge the hegemon. Balance of power politics over time reduces the relative power of the hegemon. For example, **France was dominant under Louis XIV in 1660 but faced competition by 1713 from England, Austria, and Russia. Similarly, Britain seemed unbeatable in 1860, but by 1910, Germany, Japan, and the US were rising as challengers.** Thus, in the future, another major power or coalition may emerge as the US's relative power declines.

- *Based on an article by Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise”*

CONCLUSION

The chapter also dissected the multifaceted nature of American hegemony, encompassing hard power, structural power, and soft power, each reinforcing the US's dominant position in international affairs. However, despite this dominance, the chapter highlighted the inherent constraints on American power, whether from emerging economic competitors, ideological resistance, or the challenges posed by global public opinion and non-state actors. India's evolving relationship with the US serves as a case study in navigating this hegemonic landscape, illustrating

how countries can renegotiate their positions in a world shaped by US influence. The chapter also examined potential strategies for overcoming hegemony, drawing on historical examples to suggest that while hegemony may seem insurmountable, it is never permanent. In conclusion, while the US continues to wield significant power globally, the future of this dominance is not guaranteed. The historical precedents discussed in the chapter remind us that hegemony, no matter how formidable, is subject to change as global dynamics evolve. As such, understanding the nuances of US hegemony is crucial for any nation or actor seeking to engage with or challenge the current world order.

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