

Russia, Ukraine, and the Testing of American Hegemony

Written by Robert W. Murray and Luke M. Herrington

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ROBERT W. MURRAY AND LUKE M. HERRINGTON, MAR 6 2014

The crisis in Ukraine, like several before it, has provoked another wave of criticism about the Obama Administration's handling of US foreign policy, with a number of pundits and critics arguing that Russia's invasion of Crimea and handling of the Ukraine crisis are directly related to America's decline. We do not always agree on the matter of the United States' alleged decline—or President Obama's role in that process—but the narratives dominating discussion on the crisis in Ukraine have inspired us to clarify a few issues. First, a disclaimer—we both approach this issue from a theoretical standpoint and are not seeking to ignore or delegitimize the human-level variables in Ukraine. Rather, we are intervening in the narrative that has quickly emerged about the power position of the US in the international system and how this might relate to Russia's behavior, and more, about the options available to the US, the EU, or perhaps even NATO in working to resolve the crisis. There have been various calls for US action and, while we approach the situation from different lenses (one from a structural realist, the other from a hegemonic stability theory), we see value in discussing the theoretical implications of the current situation.

Unipolarity, Unilateralism, and Hegemony

Many pundits, and even some scholars and military thinkers, favor greater action by the Obama Administration in the Ukraine. The world is unipolar, they assert, so the US must be capable of defending the norms and principles of international law, peace and security, and even weaker states in the face of aggression. This logic applies beyond Ukraine, with similar calls for American interventionism in Syria, Central African Republic, etc. The fact remains that it has become a common assumption that because the system is unipolar and the US is the world's lone superpower, it has the ability to intervene in every crisis at every corner of the globe. And if the US can intervene, it should.

Because President Obama has failed to meet these challenges head-on—from the “green movement” in Iran, to the Arab Spring, and on to Libya, Syria, and Ukraine—many of his critics accuse him of orchestrating a foreign policy of retreat. Or worse still, that his aloofness in world politics means that he has no coherent foreign policy to speak of at all. Indeed, last August, Frida Ghitis said the Obama Administration's foreign policy was in “tailspin.”

The problems with these arguments—that President Obama is not doing enough to meet these crises, or that the US ought to do more because it can—are many, but they fundamentally misunderstand *unipolarity* (or polarity in general) on one hand, *hegemony* on the other, and the relationship between the two—a problem itself derived from the neo-Reaganite/neoconservative misunderstanding of hegemony and hegemonic stability.

Being the only superpower in a unipolar system (i.e., the hegemon) does not automatically afford the US the ability to act in every crisis, especially if doing so requires acting alone. Unilateralism has costs. Not only is the cost of action itself increased by acting alone (resources cannot be pooled), but it can cost political capital for a hegemon to act unilaterally if doing so is seen as illegitimate by a sufficiently large proportion of other powers in the system. A unipolar structure does not somehow erode or overcome the perceptions of states trying to ensure their relative power position in the international system. The hegemon must calculate, like other states, what will best serve its interests and what actions may be too costly, whether those costs are political, military, economic, or some combination of the above.

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Power, Interests, Will, and Ability

Unpolarity describes the distribution of power in the international system, informing us that the hegemon is the only superpower. Unipolarity does not mean that there are no other great powers in the system. The hegemon, even in a unipolar structure, is constrained and must negotiate outcomes in international politics with those great powers and their respective spheres of influence, including alliances and power blocs.

And you can be sure those powers still have their own interests which will often diverge from those of the hegemon. In the current context, an American hegemon will still face opposition from states and blocs that do not share norms or interests with the US. Great powers do not sacrifice their own aspirations and interests because the system is unipolar; they just need to be creative in finding ways to achieve their goals, especially if they are at odds with those of the hegemon. Stephen Walt's recent piece at *Foreign Policy* sufficiently illustrates this point.

The other important variable is the perception of the hegemon's ability to project its influence and protect its interests abroad. Systemic structure does not last forever and the international distribution of power is ever-changing. While the system remains unipolar, the ability of the US to behave as a hegemon has declined. When other great powers sense that they have greater latitude to act without threat of reprisal from the hegemon, they will seek to maximize their own power position in the system.

The ongoing situation in Ukraine is a good example of this.

Ukraine, as part of the old Soviet empire, remains in Russia's sphere of influence (or at least, its desired sphere of influence). With the size of the Russian population there, and the naval base at Sevastopol, it should come as no surprise that the Russians have a strong desire to maintain their interests on the Crimean peninsula, or Ukraine writ large. Indeed, gaining access to a warm-water port has been cited as a motivating factor behind the Soviet's failed invasion of Afghanistan. Sevastopol is Russia's only warm-water port. As such, it would be hard to imagine a world where Russia wasn't ready to defend its interests in Crimea.

The US may have the ability to project its power anywhere in the globe, but when dealing with another great power's sphere of influence its room for action diminishes greatly. The US already has limited actual interests in Ukraine; combine this with the fact that Russia has both the will and ability to act on its interests there, and it becomes clear why the Obama Administration has waffled on this issue.

Polarity, Balance of Power, and Hegemony

The "unipolar moment" ushered in by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War more or less persists today. The United States is the world's only superpower. Several, however, contend that the world may be entering a "post-American," multipolar phase, in which US hegemony will decline, and the emergence of new superpowers capable of dominating world politics will be constrained by a realignment of the balance of power. Rising powers, ranging from Brazil, Russia, India, and China, to Japan, the EU, and on eventually to Iran, the narrative goes, will become new centers of power capable of augmenting the international distribution of power in a way that constrains US adventurism. Stemming from a classical understanding of balance of power theory, this narrative holds that a hegemonic actor cannot emerge in an international system characterized by bipolarity or multipolarity, but this mistakenly conflates hegemony with unipolarity.

This brings us to a vital point: unipolarity does not equal hegemony. These are simply not the same thing.

This can be better visualized in some ways in terms of the "agent-structure problem" in IR. Hegemons are actors (agents), and polarity is a feature of the system (structure). Hegemony is exercised then, by a single state capable of manipulating the polar features of the international system to suit its own interests, such that institutions like the "balance of power," for instance, become tools of the hegemon.

The diplomatically-able hegemon can thus manipulate the international distribution of power according to its own

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interests and resources. The best example of this point comes from the most recent hegemonic leadership reign of Great Britain. In the 1800s, the international system was characterized as multipolar with a five-state balance of power, leading many theorists to conclude that bipolar and multipolar balances of power can prevent the outgrowth of a single hegemon. Yet, the British were quite adept at acting as the fulcrum for the rest of the great powers in the balance of power, and thus shifting the interests of the balance to meet its own needs.

Does the World Need a Leader?

Hegemonic stability theorists—who largely fell out of prominence in IR theory after the 1980s—understand that the world needs a leader. Hegemony is essentially synonymous with leadership. Yes, leadership can fall on a spectrum with an overly “imperialistic” leader micromanaging international affairs at one extreme (unilateralism), and a highly collaborative, possibly more democratic, possibly aloof leader at the other (multilateralism). But regardless of leadership style, HST posits that the world needs a leader. Why? The hegemon is responsible for establishing the regimes and institutions that help mitigate international instability, promote security, and ender economic prosperity. Do not confuse this with altruism, however; the hegemon may occasionally be motivated by benevolent self-interest, but is motivated by self-interest nonetheless. The hegemon is interested, as many realists suggest, in security and profit. It is thus willing to bear the costs of leadership, such as maintaining stability and creating profit globally, because its benefits are asymmetric by comparison. The instability that results from the lack of a leader is thus too costly for hegemonic aspirants and the other players in the system. This is the case regardless of the polar features of the system; hegemons are still needed in both conditions of multipolarity and bipolarity.

Decline

When discussing decline, it is necessary to distinguish between the analytically distinct kinds of decline a state may experience. On one hand, there is *relative decline*. States experience relative decline when they fail to compete with their neighbors, or otherwise fall behind in important areas of competition. For example, those who view decline in the context of a rising China, a resurgent Russia, or the emerging markets of the other BRICS states are usually concerned that the US is going to fall behind in important sectors like science, technology, and education to name only a few. Titled “Another Way China May Beat the US,” a small blurb in the April 2011 print edition of *Time* magazine illustrates this point. Citing the Royal Society of the United Kingdom, the passage cautioned that China was on the verge of overtaking the US in scientific output, because government-backed Chinese scientists were overtaking the US in the number of high quality scientific publications they produce each year. Similar statistics abound: in education, the US trails behind Korea, Japan, and Russia, among others; in healthcare, the US ranks 36th in the world.

On the other hand, there is *absolute decline*, which is a markedly different process. Some of President Obama’s harshest critics have accused him of orchestrating America’s absolute decline by comparing it to, for example, the Roman Empire. States die, though as Waltz reminds us, quite rarely. Yugoslavia and many failed states may have experienced absolute decline, or the utter collapse of government (and perhaps even national identity), but one would be hard-pressed to make a case that the US is on the verge of total collapse.

There is a third form of decline, however, unique to hegemonic actors like the United States. According to hegemonic stability theory (HST), a world leader can only maintain the ability to ensure international stability for a limited time (approximately 70 to 100 years). At the end of that period, the world leader experiences a process of *hegemonic decline*. Aspects of relative or absolute decline could easily accompany this process, but hegemonic decline is unique. Typically occurring in the leading state’s military and economic sectors, hegemonic decline frequently results from what Yale historian Paul Kennedy calls “imperial overstretch,” and ultimately entails a retreat from global commitments.

US Hegemonic Decline

With a proper understanding of decline in mind, there is a compelling case to be made that the US may in fact be experiencing hegemonic decline.

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By withdrawing its troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, and waffling on Iran in 2009, Libya in 2011, and Syria in 2013, it's hardly a wonder that many of the president's critics perceive him as abdicating in the Middle East and Central Asia. If American foreign policy really is in retreat, then declinist rhetoric may be justified. After all, this pull back is characteristic of hegemonic decline.

This might further explain why the Obama Administration has had difficulty acting in Syria or Ukraine. An ailing hegemon—even in a unipolar system—simply cannot stand up to the great/emerging powers seeking to alter the balance of power in every situation. Add to that the fact that US resources in the region have been minimized as a result of the end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we can see why America's strategic interests are limited.

Of course, this is to say nothing of an alternative possibility. There is an equally compelling argument to be made that US grand strategy in the Middle East and Central Asia has always focused on promoting instability and sowing the seeds of discord. George Friedman, of the geopolitical forecasting firm STRATFOR, suggests that the US will continue this strategy to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon, among other things. As such, the "failure" to act on Syria may have been a calculated decision meant to leave Assad's regime in something of a state of chaos. From this perspective, the withdrawal of US troops from the region, and the "retreat" of American foreign policy may just be seen as a corrective to the previous onset of imperial overstretch caused by the neo-Reaganite/neoconservative promoted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ultimately, it may be difficult to argue against the fact that American hegemony has been in decline and will continue to do so as time goes on. However, this decline is not absolute in nature, and while it is relative to an extent, it is primarily a hegemonic decline. To argue that China, Russia or any other BRICS state is close to the US in terms of capabilities measurement is a far stretch. Relatively speaking, the US still dominates the international system in most every measurable category that would seem to speak against arguments surrounding relative decline.

The US' hegemonic decline has profound implications moving forward. Though the US may still have a preponderance of power, it no longer has the ability to unilaterally deter or compel the actions of other great powers. Recent years have demonstrated that other larger powers are testing the proverbial waters on just how far the US will go to maintain its position in the system, and if it is perceived the US is weak or unwilling, great powers will assert themselves. Ukraine is just the latest example of Russia pushing the limits of American dominance. Indeed, the limited withdraw of some troops near the Ukrainian border may further illustrate this point. And other examples, such as Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War, Iran's nuclear program, and Arctic aggression all demonstrate clearly that the Russians no longer believe the US is fully capable of containing or deterring their actions. This also sets a dangerous precedent for other emerging powers, as questions abound regarding how China will approach Taiwan, Japan and other matters of its regional interests.

This is not to say that relative decline is not occurring at all, or will not occur. Naturally, hegemonic decline is often accompanied by relative decline, but the real discussion about the end of US hegemony is still many years away. For the time being, the system will remain unipolar and the rise of great powers, though noteworthy, should not be overstated.

In this context, the situation in Ukraine is unlikely to generate any significant response from the US for two reasons—one, because Ukraine poses little benefit to US interests; and two, because the US cannot deter Russia in its own sphere of influence. The announcement of sanctions by the Obama Administration is being carefully coordinated with the EU and other allies, as the European market is heavily dependent on Russian natural gas. This then speaks to the fact that not only is the US unable to compel Russian behavior, but NATO and the EU are also not likely to play a significant role beyond sanctions and travel bans.

There is no doubt that Russia's aggression is worthy of response from the US, the west, and from international institutions, but whatever the response, it must take into account the strategic realities of the current structure of the international system.

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