

# The Main Factors Limiting the Ability of the U.S. to Control World Politics

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HAOYU ZHAI, FEB 12 2015

### What are the Main Factors Limiting the Ability of the U.S. to Control what Happens in World Politics?

#### Introduction

In recent years, an increasing amount of International Relations literature has begun to recognize the constraints and challenges the United States faces when attempting to control events and outcomes in world politics (Ferguson, 2008: 272-78; Layne, 2012: 410-20; Terhalle and Depledge, 2013: 574). Given its present global significance as 'the world's sole superpower' (Deudney and Meiser, 2012: 21), it is of considerable importance for political scientists to correctly identify the major factors constraining its capability to control international affairs. Written for greater academic attention to the said issue, this essay will argue that there are two main factors limiting the ability of the U.S. to control what happens in contemporary world politics: the increasing economic interdependence between states and the emerging multipolar world order. The following sections will be devoted to detailed analysis of these factors: the first section concerns the constraining effect of international economic interdependence on U.S. global management, and the second section examines how an emerging multipolar world order also limits the ability of the U.S. to control international politics.

#### Main Factors

##### *Economic Interdependence between States*

The increasing economic interdependence between states is a major factor limiting the ability of the United States to control international political outcomes. Mainly as a result of the remarkable growth of international trade and financial flow, individual countries and their national economic performance have become more interdependent on each other (Bromley et al., 2004: 6; Russett and Starr, 1989: 543). A number of figures could illustrate this considerable increase in trade and economic interdependence. Statistically, interstate trade has been growing at an annual rate of 3 to 9 percent throughout the post-war period, noticeably higher than that of global production (Nye and Welch, 2011: 256; O'Brien and Williams, 2007: 149). Subsequently, there has been an approximately 14-time expansion in global trade between 1950 and 1997, followed by a further 10 percent increase from 2000 to 2005 (WTO, in O'Brien and Williams, 2007: 149). These data clearly demonstrate the growing significance of international trade for modern states, and simultaneously reflects their increasing economic interdependence.

Specifically for the United States, its economic dependence on trade with foreign countries has considerably grown: the percentage share of international trade in U.S. gross domestic product has risen from only around 5.6 percent in 1960 to 11.2 percent in 1995, reaching a higher 14.7 percent by 2007 (Nye and Welch, 2011: 256). As of 2012, according to data provided by the World Bank, this figure has further risen to 23.9 percent, up from 18.5 percent in 2009 (World Bank, 2014). The once unique advantage of enjoying a substantially smaller share of trade in GDP compared to other developed economies has but largely been reduced (Moon, 2006: 436). An inevitable consequence caused by such dependence is that prior to intervening in international affairs to achieve its desired outcomes, the U.S. nonetheless has to consider if the deliberated act would harm its own economic interest, which in

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turn constrains its ability to control global politics.

Such constraining effect is observable in many recent international political affairs, in which the United States, constrained by economic interdependence, is compelled to aim primarily at preserving economic self-interest, rather than more desired outcomes. In such cases, the whole situation is not controlled by the U.S., but instead is fundamentally dominated by the binding relationship of economic interdependence between it and other actors. For instance, to secure stable source of oil imports and arms sale worth \$53 million, the U.S. refrained from any practical action that might stop the Bahraini regime from brutally suppressing civil uprising amid the Arab Spring, even covertly allowing the oil-abundant Saudi Arabia to lead a military intervention to crack down protests in this kingdom (Atlas, 2012: 375-77). In addition, dependence on bilateral trade, access to both the Chinese domestic market and its large-scale, low-cost workforce have all been economic handcuffs that restrained the US from dominating Sino-American relations. This is discernible in multiple events, from its failure to force the Chinese government into significant appreciation of the renminbi after the financial crisis to its virtual defeat at the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference by China and its allies (Jacques, 2012; Lee, 2010: 21). Similarly, successful Japanese resistance against American pressure on exports and trade deficit also reveals the political constraint caused by economic interdependence, especially considering Japan's inferior military capabilities relative to the U.S. and the former's security dependence on the latter (Young and Kent, 2004: 708). In brief, empirical evidence consistently shows the negative impact of economic interdependence on international political manipulation by the U.S., therefore confirms economic interdependence as a major factor limiting US control of world politics.

Furthermore, in the contemporary global macroeconomic context, characterized by intensified economic integration and transnationalization of production (Oatley, 2010; O'Brien and Williams, 2007), the development of individual national economies depends increasingly on that of their co-players in the international arena. Consequently, the strategic concern of economic self-harm often limits the political ability of certain actors to unilaterally control international relations or determine their outcomes. Thus, the traditional realist argument that dominant states employ their individual economic advantages as political weapons for coercive purposes in the anarchical international system could no longer reflect the contemporary global environment. As interpreted above, economic interdependence ensures any negative economic impact on target countries would inevitably bring economic loss to the acting country willing to dominate the situation, creating obstacle for the latter in the world system, obstructing its incentives and capability of effective management. Therefore, applying such mechanism to the U.S., economic interdependence proves to be a major factor constraining its ability to control international politics. Hence, one of the main factors limiting the ability of the U.S. to control what happens in world politics is the increasing economic interdependence between states.

## *Emerging Multipolar World Order*

Apart from the increasing economic interdependence between states, the emerging multipolar world order is another main factor limiting the ability of the U.S. to control what happens in world politics. As Nye and Welch interpreted, the term 'multipolar' denotes 'the structure of an international system in which three or more states or alliances dominate world politics' (2011: 329). In other words, in such a system no single great power could exercise complete control over world politics. Instead, each dominant state is limited in its ability and actions by the presence and power of other comparable players. In recent years, as the post-Cold War world order undergoes the transition from unipolarity towards multipolarity (Cooper and Flesmes, 2013; Deudney and Meiser, 2012: 36; Layne, 2012: 413-16), the emerging multipolar order has simultaneously become a major factor limiting U.S. control of world politics, whose ability to achieve such management was previously less constrained.

Throughout the post-Cold War period, the U.S. has been experiencing increasing challenges by regional and global players when attempting to exert control on international affairs. In several events, its agenda became unrealized due to opposition from other main players on the global stage. Empirical cases supporting such systematic constraint are not scarce. For instance, the constraining effect of Russian power on U.S. global domination is seen with little difficulty in the former's invasion and defeat of Georgia, annexation of Crimea and successful resistance towards repeated American requests of extraditing Edward Snowden, all of which against U.S. interests (Larson and Shevchenko, 2014; Lieven, 2012: 404). Likewise, as increasingly demonstrated in recent Sino-American relations,

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the political capability of the U.S. is under growing challenge from a rising China empowered by its rapidly expanding economy and modernizing military (Cole, 2008: 168-70; Zhao, 2008: 3-4). From China's refusal to U.S.-proposed widening sanctions against Iran and North Korea, to its undeterred assertiveness against American stance vis-à-vis territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the United States consistently found its influence obstructed and objectives unreached because of Chinese power and opposition (Goldstein, 2013: 50; Lee, 2010: 21; Lieven, 2012: 403). Moreover, the European Union has been engaged in multiple trade disputes with the U.S. on wide-ranging issues, and has unhesitatingly challenged the U.S. for its own politico-economic interests (Canterbury, 2009: 809; European Parliament, 2013). Such European constraint on American domination and freedom of action is particularly displayed by the 2003 U.S.-EU steel dispute: faced with European threat of severe retaliatory measures, the US was forced to cancel protectionist barriers against EU steel imports (BBC, 2003; Breuss, 2004). Together with other cases, a uniform feature of these events is that the United States, despite being the only remaining superpower in the world, does not command an absolute monopoly of global dominance. On the contrary, its ability to control and manage world politics is limited by the growing power and presence of other notable players, to the extent that these actors could increasingly influence international relations in their favour. The unipolar global dominance by the U.S. has weakened, as emerging agents growingly challenge American global administration. As a result, the ability of the U.S. to control what happens in world politics is limited by the emerging multipolar world order.

Indeed, as demonstrated above, a prominent feature of the contemporary international arena seems to be the lack of consistent, effective control by the United States, where the increased agency of emerging powers is continuously reshaping the existing global political structure. As Zakaria commented back in 2009:

[a]s countries become stronger and richer, and as the United States struggles to earn back the world's faith, we're likely to see more challenges and greater assertiveness from rising nations (quoted in Kegley and Blanton, 2013: 109).

The collective outcome of the rising capabilities and autonomy of individual actors is the overall transformation of world order and international system, which would only bring more limits and constraints on the ability of the leading power in successful global management. Concerning the historical transition of the international system, few would dispute that the world order immediately after the Cold War was temporarily a unipolar one, with the U.S. possessing unrivalled capabilities and great control over world affairs (Kegley and Blanton, 2013: 106-7; Young and Kent, 2004: 605-6); however, such unbalanced dominance could hardly prove true thereafter. Henceforth, the emergence of new great powers has been making the international order increasingly multipolarized, leaving the United States narrowing scopes of global management. This simultaneity of changes in world order and U.S. capability of world control further confirms the role of the emerging multipolar system as a major factor limiting the ability of the U.S. in global management. Therefore, the emerging multipolar world order is a main factor limiting the ability of the U.S. to control what happens in world politics.

## Conclusion

In summary, this essay has identified two main factors limiting the ability of the United States to control what happens in contemporary world politics, which are the increasing economic interdependence between states and the emerging multipolar world order. First, by analyzing relevant data and empirical cases, this essay has demonstrated the significance of the growing economic interdependence to the U.S. and its constraining effect on the ability of the latter to control world politics; second, by examining actual events in international relations, this essay has revealed how an emerging multipolar world order limits the capability of the U.S. to monopolize international relations. As seen above, because of the increasing economic interdependence between states, American interventions with negative impact on target countries would reciprocally harm the U.S. economy, which restrains its freedom of action in the international arena. At the same time, due to the emerging multipolar world order, American global domination is increasingly challenged by rising powers, which also limits the ability of the U.S. to control global political outcomes. Broadly speaking, these factors also reflect the dichotomous state of the contemporary world, which is both globalizing economically and fragmenting geopolitically. Such complicated and changing global context demands greater academic focus on the role of the U.S. in international relations. Finally, to conclude, there are two main factors limiting the ability of the United States to control what happens in contemporary world politics: the increasing

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economic interdependence between states and the emerging multipolar world order.

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