GCSP Policy Brief Series

The GCSP policy brief series publishes papers in order to assess the policy challenges, dilemmas, and policy recommendations in all aspects of transnational security and globalization. The series was created and is edited by Dr. Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan, Senior Scholar in Geostrategy and Director of the Program on the Geopolitical Implications of Globalization and Transnational Security.

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US Hegemony and Globalization

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Review and Critique

With the demise of the bipolar system, the United States (US) is the only remaining superpower. Its global reach is such that François Heisbourg has referred to the US not simply as a superpower but as a “hyperpuissance.”¹ With this unparalleled position comes heavy responsibilities, many of which the US has taken up. For example, the US played a pivotal role in the post-war reconstruction of Europe and the revival of world capitalism in the wake of the double shock of the Great Depression and World War II. The relative weakness of European countries as a result of economic devastation and the fragile position of their ruling classes made Western Europe’s integration into an American-centered world order what Geir Lundestad has referred to as “empire by invitation.”² In this context, the majority of Western European leaders were willing to accept American leadership. In return, as Mark Sheetz notes in his policy brief, the US provided an international financial and commercial order, as well as defense and security to its allies. The US has, in turn, benefited from this in that it has been able to impose its rules on the international system.³

A number of challenges to US hegemony have nevertheless begun to appear. The recovery of Western Europe and the rise of Japan as a formidable economic power put considerable pressure on the US position within the globalizing economy during the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, the US managed to retain its position by virtue of the shift from the Bretton Woods system to a de facto pure dollar system,⁴ which effectively allows the US to continue to maintain balance-of-payments deficits. Yet, the increased economic clout of China, in particular, is likely to become an increasing source of economic competition for the US. Thus, the temptation to opt for increased protectionism will be strong.

The legitimacy of US leadership is also being called into question. At the most benign level, Europeans are already pushing for greater autonomy in the Euro-Atlantic security realm. Their European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), while still in its infancy, may increasingly erode the US monopoly on decision-making within the Euro-Atlantic security arena.⁵ Yet, a much more serious challenge to US leadership is being posed by the “empire’s” discontents. How the US responds to this challenge will be crucial to its own stability and security, as well as to that of the rest of the world. Earlier, much of the strength of US hegemony lay in its democratic foundations and its capacity to act as a beacon of hope. This strength is, however, currently being undermined by US refusal to be restrained by international law and its abuse of human rights. Against the backdrop of diminishing credibility, the US risks embarking on what may be perceived as “empire by imposition.” The Greater Middle Eastern Initiative, for example, is viewed by many in the region as pure imperialism. Thus, while the US is able to impose its will, doing so with disregard for international justice, as well as for foreign economic, political, and cultural traits, runs the risk of undermining US hegemony over the long term.
Dilemmas and Our Recommendations

In order for the United States to retain its leadership position and to promote greater stability and security across the globe, it must be a responsible hegemon. If it fails in this task, its long-term security, as well as the security of many people around the world, will be diminished. In what follows, we propose eight dilemmas or challenges facing the US and eight corresponding recommendations.

As mentioned, the post-World War II reconstruction of Europe was in many ways an example of invitational, consensual hegemony. European powers, for the most part, accepted US leadership against the backdrop of economic devastation, societal instability, and the Cold War. Yet, in other circumstances, US hegemony may, for real or perceived reasons, be viewed as outside interference or even outright imperialism. As a result, the US should resist...
derailing the principles of international justice and freedom both internally and externally. It should also promote soft-power instruments and avoid hypocrisy.

Hegemony in a market democratic world is one thing; hegemony to prevent peer competition is another. For the sake of its long-term stability, the US should promote fair competition and comparative advantage for the sake of humanity in a globalized world. In order to be a “benevolent” hegemon, the US should continue to act as an engine of globalization, which will necessarily promote the national interest, but it should do so in a way that fosters greater economic justice within states, as well as between them. The US should also support effective international justice and fairness. Indeed, this will be a prerequisite for re-establishing its credibility.

As mentioned, the US has provided stability within the Euro-Atlantic area for the greater part of the post-World War II period. Within an altered security environment, the US now faces the choice of using its position to enhance global security and transcultural harmony or to demonize others, foster alienation, and generate increased insecurity. US policy makers should promote diversity and cultural respect through public diplomacy. Long-term stability and security are likely to depend on this. In the interest of preventing US misadventures, policy makers should also ensure the independence of the press domestically in order to make it a credible and objective Fourth Estate. This way, American voters might be in a better position to evaluate and criticize government decisions.

A large part of the explanation for US short-sightedness is linked to the power of special interests not only within the media but also within the political and electoral system. Ideally, the electoral system should be reformed in such a way as to limit the influence of special interest groups. In addition, democratic oversight, as well as checks and balances within the political system, should be augmented.

**Conclusion**

While affording a great deal of influence, US hegemony comes at a cost. In order to be durable, it must be responsible. In the interests of its own long-term stability and security, the US should take its responsibilities seriously. This implies underpinning its policies and actions with fairness, justice, and respect for other cultures. If the US fails to do this, it is likely not only to erode its dominant position but also to face increasingly difficult challenges at home and abroad.

**References**

