

Fragmented Stability: Can order Exist Without a Hegemon?

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Source: The Next Web²

Introduction

Hegemonic Stability Theory is a fundamental concept within international relations, describing how order is maintained in the world. Rooted in political science, economics, and history, the theory postulates that international systems remain stable and cooperative when a single dominant power—a hegemon—exercises overwhelming influence over economic, military, and political affairs. The hegemon provides necessary global public goods, such as security guarantees, a stable international monetary system, and rules for open trade, which together serve to reduce uncertainty and induce cooperation among states. This theory gained prominence for explaining the post-World War II Pax Americana, where the leadership of the United States underpinned decades of relative peace and prosperity through institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and NATO.

The very concept of hegemony, from the Greek word for "leader," suggests a state that not only possesses superior capabilities but is willing to enforce rules and carry disproportionate costs toward sustaining global order. Historical experiences, such as British hegemony during the 19th

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² <https://img-cdn.tnwcndn.com/image?fit=1280%2C720&url=https%3A%2F%2Fcdn0.tnwcndn.com%2Fwp-content%2Fblogs.dir%2F1%2Ffiles%2F2021%2F07%2FEarth-splinter-shatter-internet-hed.jpg&signature=cc08a83049062dba148e301036928b80>

century and U.S. hegemony since 1945, demonstrate the relationship between hegemonic leadership and economic openness, or at least the absence of generalized conflict. On the other hand, HST predicts instability in case hegemonic power is weakening or in retreat, as during the interwar period characterized by protectionism and geopolitical unrest.

As the current international system moves away from U.S. unipolarity toward a more fragmented multipolar configuration with the rise of powers such as China and regional players, questions of viability surround the notion of order without hegemony. This commentary covers these dynamics by, first, discussing the mechanisms of hegemonic stability, then exploring historical lessons, and, lastly, looking into the extent to which fragmented stability can persist in the absence of hegemonic dominance within today's complex global environment.

Historical Context: Lessons from Past Hegemons

The historical experiences of past hegemons offer crucial insights into what hegemonic leadership means to the order and stability of the international environment. The two most commonly cited examples of hegemonic stability theory include the Pax Britannica, 1815-1914, and the Pax Americana, 1945-present-day, each illustrating how dominant powers have influenced the nature of global governance systems, peace, and economic openness.



Source: Meer³

Pax Britannica refers to the period of British dominance across the globe between the Napoleonic Wars and the start of World War I. In this period, Britain's naval supremacy and economic preeminence allowed it to maintain relative peace through a mixture of deterrence and the enforcement of international norms. No other power could match the strength of Britain's Royal Navy; it policed the sea lanes essential to international trade, suppressing piracy and slave trading, and thus provided key public goods that facilitated an international order propitious for commerce and security. The period saw a number of regional wars, from the Crimean War to various smaller conflicts in Europe, but the overarching presence of the hegemon prevented a

³ <https://www.meer.com/en/77747-empires-and-hegemony>.

general war, thereby maintaining what some historians describe as "La Belle Époque," a period of considerable but precarious peace and prosperity at the global level⁴.

The stability of Pax Britannica came by no means without challenges: fiscal pressures and the rise of other industrializing powers, especially Germany and the United States, pulled against Britain's global reach. By the early twentieth century, Britain's relative decline was unmistakable. The dangers of hegemonic absence were then dramatically illustrated in the interwar period. An enfeebled Britain and an at-first reluctant United States ushered in a fragmented international system. Without enforcement ability or hegemonic support, the League of Nations could not stem aggressive expansionism and economic nationalism; the Great Depression and the outbreak of World War II thus occurred.

The Pax Americana in the post-World War II international system was characterized by US military, economic, and institutional leadership. The United States replaced Britain as the hegemon and invested in the reconstruction of war-torn economies through the Marshall Plan, built international institutions including the IMF and the World Bank, and established security alliances such as NATO. These frameworks would institutionalize an open, rules-based international order that would facilitate trade and investment, along with collective security. The ideological underpinning of Pax Americana, inspiring liberal democracy and capitalism, further distinguished it from its predecessor⁵.

Different from Britain's more indirect imperial role, U.S. hegemony combined overwhelming military power with active diplomatic and economic engagement with the rest of the world. The U.S. played this hegemonic role by providing a stable monetary system pegged to the U.S. dollar, deterring Soviet expansionism during the Cold War, and bearing the costs of global security commitments. It was this active leadership that kept the peace among the great powers and allowed the liberal international order to thrive for decades⁶.

These historical experiences affirm that hegemonic powers contribute critical public goods that form the infrastructure of global order. Any decline or retreat of the hegemon risks allowing competitive rivalries, economic fragmentation, and institutional decay to undermine stability—lessons highly relevant to the transition underway from Pax Americana to a more fragmented global order.

Mechanisms of Hegemonic Maintenance

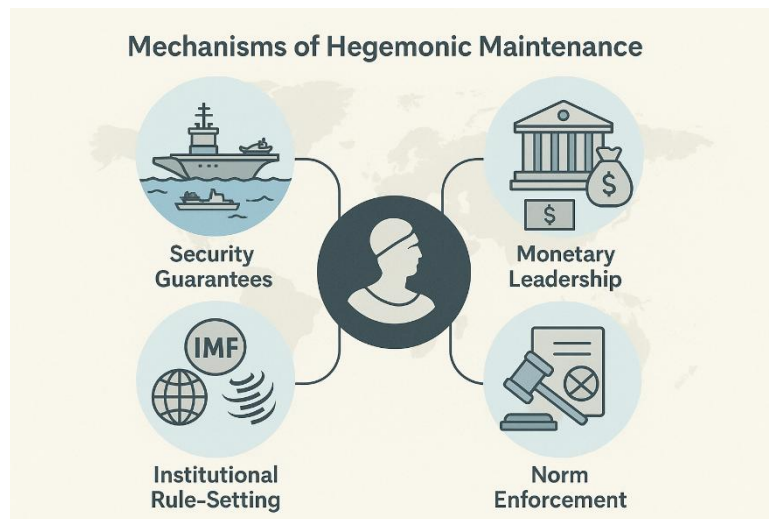
Hegemonic Stability Theory maintains that the hegemon sustains international order by providing global public goods necessary for security, economic stability, and rule enforcement.

⁴ "Pax Americana." Wikipedia, October 31, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Americana.

⁵ Jeffrey Yozwiak. "Origins of the Pax Britannica and the Pax Americana." Jeffrey Yozwiak, August 14, 2020. <https://www.yozwiak.com/blog/origins-of-the-pax-britannica-and-the-pax-americana>.

⁶ Терентьев, Павел. "Global Economic Leadership: Pax Britannica and Pax Americana." 파벨 Global Economic Leadership: Pax Britannica and Pax Americana. Graduate School of International Studies 서울대학교 대학원, 2022.

The hegemon's role reaches across military, economic, political, and institutional domains, making the environment stable enough to allow for cooperation among states. A key mechanism through which a hegemon maintains order is by providing security guarantees. The hegemon discourages would-be aggressors with overwhelming military capability, maintaining peace amongst rival powers and securing vital parts of international commons, including maritime trade routes. During Pax Americana, for example, the United States deployed naval forces to ensure freedom of navigation, which was central to maintaining global commerce and preventing regional wars from growing into larger conflicts⁷. A hegemon capable and willing to use military force acts as a deterrent, ensuring the respect of rules within the system.



Source: ChatGPT⁸

Beyond security, the hegemon underpins a stable international monetary system, often providing the world's reserve currency. Monetary leadership by the hegemon facilitates liquidity and reduces transactional risks, which serves to promote trade and investment by stabilizing exchange rates and promoting convertibility. The Bretton Woods system, established in 1944 under U.S. auspices, exemplifies this mechanism by pegging currencies to the U.S. dollar, which was convertible to gold. This arrangement sustained postwar economic recovery and growth by enhancing predictability in international finance⁹.

Economic leadership also manifests in the hegemon's institutional rule-setting role. International economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization emerged under hegemonic guidance, creating norms, dispute settlement procedures, and surveillance functions helpful in maintaining openness and cooperation. These institutions

⁷ Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 53-65, 1981.

⁸ ChatGPT. *Mechanisms of Hegemonic Maintenance*. AI-generated infographic, November 1, 2025. OpenAI. <https://chat.openai.com/>

⁹ Kindleberger, Charles P. *The World in Depression 1929-1939*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 142-160, 1973.

decrease uncertainty about state behavior, especially in the context of free-riding, and manage crises through collective responses. However, such an effectiveness of the institutions themselves depends on hegemonic support; without the latter, enforcement mechanisms weaken, as shown by the League of Nations during the interwar period¹⁰.

More importantly, compliance is ensured because of norm enforcement by the hegemon. The hegemon devises and enforces sets of global rules on issues such as intellectual property rights and nonproliferation agreements, using rewards or punishment to make states comply. The U.S.-led enforcement actions in the Persian Gulf during 1991 and 2003 not only served the former's strategic interests but also restored the credibility of the international security order, hinting at penalties to potential challengers¹¹.

Importantly, hegemonic maintenance requires a multidimensional mix of capabilities; military preeminence provides coercive power; economic dominance affords the wherewithal for cost-bearing; political legitimacy motivates leadership; institutional influence cements rule authority; and ideological appeal undergirds consent among allies and subjects. In other words, one important implication is that any failure or weakening in one dimension hampers overall hegemonic effectiveness. For instance, the Soviet Union's military strength was incomparable in Cold War confrontations, whereas the economy was insufficient and lacked ideological legitimacy, which contributed to its collapse¹².

Challenges of Hegemonic Decline and the Rise of Multipolarity

The relative decline of hegemonic powers-primarily the United States-and the concurrent rise of other global actors have so far posed serious challenges to the stability that has long been maintained under hegemonic stability. Hegemonic stability theory provides that a hegemon needs to have not only overwhelming power but also a willingness to bear the costs for the provision of global public goods, the enforcement of rules, and the maintenance of order. If a hegemon declines, then its ability or will to perform these functions decreases, leading to destabilization and perhaps setting off a transition toward multipolarity marked by competition, fragmentation, and uncertainty¹³.

¹⁰ Ikenberry, G. John. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 55-77, 2011.

¹¹ Wohlforth, William. "The Stability of a Unipolar World." *International Security* 24, no. 1 (1999): 5-41.

¹² Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 85-90, 1981.

¹³ Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 90-95, 1981



Source: Vocal¹⁴

The rise of fiscal and political constraints often precipitates hegemonic decline internally. For example, mounting public debt, increased defense expenditures, and internal political gridlock in the United States all make it difficult for the hegemon to manage and provide leadership in world affairs. As economic growth slows relative to rising powers, the hegemon's surplus resources, necessary to subsidize the provision of global public goods, shrink¹⁵. Economically, this decline correlates with increased domestic protectionism and a reluctance toward international engagement, further eroding the liberal order that a hegemon traditionally supports.

Externally, the emergence of challengers-most particularly, China-complexifies hegemonic preeminence. Rapid economic growth, advanced technological capabilities, and increased military power have enabled China to rival U.S. influence in key regions and institutions. Such power diffusion results in a security dilemma where the hegemon and emergent powers perceive one another's actions as threatening and, therefore, engage in increased militarization and rivalry rather than cooperation¹⁶. The absence of a clear hegemon that would be capable of compelling the enforcement of rules accentuates the "power transition" dynamics that have, throughout history, been associated with great power conflicts¹⁷.

Two clear scenarios emerge in hegemonic decline: that of a close power gap when the hegemon is challenged by a rising power, yet with no clear transitions; this generates competition, uncertainty, and tension. And secondly, the challenger could succeed in surpassing the hegemon

¹⁴https://res.cloudinary.com/jerrick/image/upload/d_642250b563292b35f27461a7.png,f_jpg,fl_progressive,q_auto,w_1024/6831aed515fd75001daf7fcc.jpg

¹⁵ Keohane, Robert O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 130-134, 1984.

¹⁶ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton, 35-40, 2014.

¹⁷ Tammen, Ronald L., et al. *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*. New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2000.

on key domains, after which hegemonic replacement and systemic transformation follow. A preview of these scenarios, if anything, is the current U.S.-China rivalry, where there are debates as to whether the United States is still the hegemon or whether China represents the new center of gravity in global politics¹⁸. However, unlike historical hegemonic declines, such as Britain's, to date, the modern international system has not succumbed to a global war, making it potentially different in the nature and management of a transition of power.

The emergence of multipolarity complicates governance because power becomes dispersed among a number of influential states, each pursuing different interests and norms. This, in turn, exacerbates the potential for regional conflict, fragmentation in the world economy through competing trade blocs, and challenges to the global institutions that require hegemonic support to be effective (Ikenberry 2018, 120-125). Furthermore, this global order reflects partial American retrenchment combined with the assertive strategies of the emerging powers who seek to reconstitute international rules to better suit their interests and promote a dynamic yet unstable international environment¹⁹.

Order Without a Hegemon: Possibilities and Limitations

While hegemonic stability theory does hold that the dominance of a single power has in the past produced conditions for relative global stability, the obvious evolution of the international system toward a multipolar or non-hegemonic structure raises questions from scholars and policymakers alike regarding whether a stable order can endure in the absence of a hegemon. Today, it seems evident that order might persist without hegemonic leadership, but it often tends to be fragmented, contested, and less predictable.

Whereas in a multipolar world, the power is dispersed across multiple significant actors with quite divergent interests, capabilities, and visions of global governance, constraining any single actor's capability to enforce universal rules and norms may be at stake. The upshot could be weakened cooperation and rising competition. Rather than the clear leadership and enforcement mechanisms that characterized hegemonic periods, non-hegemonic order relies heavily on negotiation, risk management, and the balancing of interests among the key actors²⁰. This structural uncertainty of such systems heightens the risks of miscalculation, shifting alliances, and regional conflicts, because actors suspect the commitments or intent of other actors. The rising incidence of military build-ups and economic protectionism further intensifies insecurity and volatility in this environment.

¹⁸ Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017

¹⁹ Ikenberry, G. John. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 120-125, 2011.

²⁰ Russell, R. and Tokatlian, J.G. (2025), A Non-Hegemonic Order: A View From Latin America. *Latin American Policy*, 16: e70016. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lamp.70016>

Viewed for long as instruments of hegemonic power, institutions have challenges of legitimacy and effectiveness in non-hegemonic orders. Global governance bodies such as the United Nations and World Trade Organization operate amidst contested authority and compliance at varied levels. Consensus eludes unless enforced through hegemonies, while institutional reforms reflecting the emerging multipolar realities are slow and contentious. A non-hegemonic order encourages pluralism, thus accommodating diverse political, cultural, and regional models rather than imposing a single value system²¹.

Order without a hegemon is not intrinsically chaotic, only ultimately less stable and more contingent than hegemonic-led systems. It requires the cultivation of mechanisms for cooperation that operate not through coercive enforcement but rather through shared interests, norms, and risk calculations. The current international order represents this tension: cooperative endeavors coexist uneasily with rivalry and divergence. Whether this fragmented stability is sustainable will depend on the ability of global actors to negotiate common frameworks within which their competitive pressures can be constructively managed.

Contemporary Global Governance in a Fragmented Order

With the diffused power and disparate interests that shape the multipolar world, global governance is faced with a number of new challenges and opportunities. Moving away from hegemonic, U.S.-dominated order toward a more diffuse system complicates the possibility of international cooperation on critical issues ranging from climate change to pandemics, migration, and economic inequality. The partial retreat of the United States from some international commitments, combined with the increasing assertiveness of other major powers such as China and Russia, has caused geopolitical fragmentation, overlapping regional orders, and sometimes competing regional orders²².



²¹ “The Consequences of a World without a Hegemon.” GIS Reports, June 5, 2025.

<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/world-hegemon/>.

²² Munich Security Report 2025, “Multi-polarization: Opportunities and Challenges,” March 2025.

Source: International Affairs BD²³

Existing global institutions-the United Nations and World Trade Organization, among others-find it difficult to adapt to such a diffusion of power. Calls for reform reflect a need to make room for the perspectives of rising powers and the Global South in more inclusive decision-making processes and recognition of regional priorities. However, comprehensive reform faces institutional inertia and competing visions of order, whereas rivalries among great powers themselves prevent consensus-building on global challenges.²⁴.

Conclusion

The shift toward a multipolar world order from that of a unipolar system closes the hegemonic era under the leadership of the United States and is both challenging and an opportunity for global stability. Although the dissemination of power complicates governance and involves greater geopolitical rivalry, it also encourages more diversity and inclusiveness within international affairs. Innovative diplomacy, institutional adaptation, and pragmatic cooperation among rising and established powers are required for sustaining order without a hegemon. An emerging fragmented stability is less predictable and contested, reflecting a new global dynamic wherein no single state is able to govern alone. This itself is calling for the collective management of shared risks in order to avoid systemic disruption.

²³ <https://internationalaffairsbd.com/a-contemporary-analysis-of-global-governance/>

²⁴ Amundi Research Center, "Multipolar World In Action 2025," September 14, 2025.