
Chapter 13- Contested American Dominance: Global Order in an Era of Rising Powers

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Abstract

The goal of this chapter is to present an analytic overview of what the potential of American decline means for rising powers on a global scale. The chapter argues that while indicators suggest American power has been declining, the shape this takes and the extent to which it falters will depend upon the contingency of global politics related to overall instability in the international system. To clarify this position: First, the chapter provides a brief overview of the current state of the scholarly and policy debates on the status of American power. Second, it examines the extent to which American power is in relative decline. Here, we will cover the US's economic struggles, decline of political leadership internationally, and military ineffectiveness, among other issues. Third, it explores the ways rising powers such as the BRICS countries and most particularly China are – or are not – providing an alternative to American global leadership. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting the ways through which the future of American dominance depends on both the decisions and collective actions of those in the corridors of power and from various social movements in the periphery.

Keywords: United States; China; Rising Powers; Military Security; Political Economy

Introduction

The inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States (US) on a gloomy, rainy evening of January 2017 is perhaps one of the most notable moments of modern American political history. Campaigning that he will “make America great again”, Trump — for all of his unforgettable policy failures, hypocrisies, gaffes, and anti-human rights remarks — promises to reverse decades of national stagnation by blatantly prioritizing American interests over other countries, even its closest allies. In his inauguration speech, Trump (2016, 39) pledged that “every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs will be made to benefit American workers and American families”. With that promise, Trump departed from the rhetoric of his predecessors, whose administrations reinforced brute American interests by forging enduring strategic partnerships that deploy diplomacy, violence, coercion and later on legitimizing them through the language of human rights, free market democracy, global stability, and international development. In many ways, Trump cut off those legitimization shortcuts and instead blatantly based his claim to legitimacy through the relentless pursuit of national interests regardless of its ethical and normative underpinnings (Regilme 2019a). Although democracy promotion abroad constituted a key element of modern US foreign policy (Rieffer & Mercer, 2006), Trumpism’s proposed road to national greatness does not rely on the language of democracy and human rights promotion within and beyond the American homeland. Whereas Obama inspired many people through his rhetorical commitments on freedoms and human rights as his drone operations program killed thousands of civilians abroad, Trump does not hesitate to incarcerate thousands of children of undocumented migrants and refugees while reinforcing the interests of rich people through tax benefits, deregulation, and subsidies (Margon, 2017; Regilme 2019b, 16). If Trump’s presidency represents a radical shift in US foreign policy, thereby resulting in the uncertainty of America’s security guarantees upon allies, then analyzing the possibilities for the sustainability of America’s dominance becomes more analytically interesting in an era of emerging powers.

The goal of this chapter is to present an overview of what the potential of American decline means for rising powers on a global scale. The global political economy has been organized around American power for over half a century but the extent to which this structure remains in place is questionable. Are we seeing the largest shift in global power since the Second World War? Are rising powers challenging American supremacy and leadership? Our goal is not necessarily to provide definitive answers to these questions; rather, our main argument states that, while indicators suggest American power has been declining, the shape this takes and the extent it falters will depend upon the contingency of global politics including factors of economic stability/instability, political hegemony, military might, and cultural influence, related to overall instability in the international system.

To address these questions, this chapter is divided into four sections. First, the chapter provides a brief overview of the current state of the scholarly and policy debates on the status of American power. Second, it examines the extent to which American power is in relative decline. Here, we will cover the US’s economic struggles, decline of political leadership internationally, and military ineffectiveness, among other issues. Third, we will look at the ways rising powers such as the BRICS countries and most particularly China are – or are not – providing an alternative to American global leadership. In particular, that section examines the geostrategic, economic, and socio-cultural challenges posed by rising powers and transformations in the global system on American power. To what extent do countries such as China, Russia, Brazil, and India, among others, have an interest in pressing back against

American power? To what degree are political differences between the countries potentially too large to provide an alternative to US dominance? The penultimate section outlines how and under which conditions does the rise of China, as a challenger power, undermine the US, as the established power. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting the ways through which the future of American dominance depends on both the decisions and collective actions of those in the corridors of power and from various social movements in the periphery.

Revisiting the Scholarly and Policy Debates on Rising Powers

The debate over first, the extent to which rising powers are transforming the previously US-centric international system and, secondly, the degree to which American power has potentially declined has been long-running and wide-ranging (Hendrickson, 2005; Vezirgiannidou, 2013; Lachmann, 2014). In the 1980s, US power was said to be in crisis as the 1970s ushered in an era of capitalist instability. By the late 1960s, American capitalism's 'golden age' was in trouble. The American economy grew steadily before this due to factors such as pent up demand during World War II, industrial growth coupled with rising wages and consumption, suburbanization, 'military Keynesianism', and government spending, among other factors (Nasser 2018, 128-131). From the Civil Rights, anti-war, and feminist social movements of the era creating the 'Vietnam syndrome' in which the American population looked upon international intervention more critically, to the rise of international economic competition pushing down profit rates for American firms, to the seeming collapse of the dollar-gold standard and transition to a floating fiat currency, it seemed American power was faltering (Block 1977; Brenner 2006). This—coupled with the rise of Japan built on the East Asian developmental state model suggested to some—but not all—that by the 1980s, American hegemony was on the decline (Keohane, 1984; Calleo, 1987; Gilpin, 1987; Kennedy, 1987; Strange, 1987; Gill, 1990).

Through the 1990s, though, American power appeared to be resurgent. Bill Clinton's presidency brought forth the era of 'globalization' in which debate over the direction of US and global power centered around questions of global labor exploitation and criticisms of the non-democratic nature of many powerful international organizations. Most centrally, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization had been pushing Structural Adjustment Policies and austerity measures on struggling countries across the world, resulting in stagnant wages, land dispossession, environmental destruction, and poverty for many, but great profits for some, particularly US multinational corporations (Peet, 2009). Protests and social movements such as the anti- or alter- globalization movement arose to challenge this (Hosseini, 2010), and some even suggested deglobalization as a concrete strategy against neoliberal free market fundamentalism (Bello, 2004).

But – once again – in the wake of 9/11 a surge of articles arguing the US was in decline emerged (Cox, 2007). The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the start of the global 'war on terror' signaled a 'terminal decline' of American hegemony (Arrighi, 2009). The US was supposedly on its last legs: the 'eagle had crash landed' (Wallerstein, 2009). And although its collapse might not be overnight, the resort to militarism and imperialism—a term which arose to relatively common use for the first time since the Vietnam War era—was a sign of the weakness of the US to hold on using its previous more consent based strategies of power. American economic power was losing momentum as China recorded ten percent GDP growth rates, suggesting to some that, among other factors, China may return to its position of predominance it had before the rise of the west (Jacques, 2009). We seemed to be moving into a post-American world (Zakaria, 2008). Others debated the extent to which we were moving

into a multipolar world. In other words, while the US may be in decline, it is not clear any potential single power has the capacity or will to replace it; rather, we were or are perhaps moving into a world organized around diffused or regional powers.

Still, others have suggested these proclamations are premature and continue to maintain that US global supremacy is here to stay (Panitch and Gindin, 2012). For one, American corporations and banks—or companies not necessarily nationally ‘American’ but with American businesspeople at the helm—still remain dominant in many global fields (Starrs, 2018). American military strength remains on top in terms of overall spending and absolute power, and as American military bases are spread across the world, as will be discussed below. Lastly, American cultural and ‘soft power’ are still influential in creating consent for the image of the ‘American Dream’ through Hollywood movies, music, and other media. Overall these perspectives suggest the United States remains the center of global capitalism and will continue its position as manager of American *and* global capitalism (Panitch and Gindin, 2012).

Most recently, central to this discussion has been the question of emerging (or re-emerging) powers. China continues to grow at a significant rate and stretch its arms across the globe through foreign investments and aid, such as cooperating to build a ‘New Silk Road’ (Mendes, 2018). China has also been deepening relations with regions across the globe, including Latin America and Africa, generating a discussion as to the extent Chinese investments and aid to Africa may be leading to a ‘new scramble for Africa’ (Carmody, 2016). India, also, continues to grow at a fast pace and, along with Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa (the BRICS) has been engaging in meetings with other rising powers. These countries could potentially cooperate to provide an alternative vision of global power separate from American leadership. In this regard, the creation of an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank remains important as it could provide an alternative to the IMF and World Bank which have been viewed as instruments controlled and operated most prominently in American interests.

It is not clear whether the BRICS desire to provide a clear alternative to either American hegemony or neoliberalism (ed. Bond and Garacia, 2015). Vijay Prashad notes, for instance, that the BRICS do not provide a serious alternative to a different world order. They have no military alliance, little institutional structure, and no clearly agreed upon ideology (Prashad 2012, 222-223). Thus, despite the fact that some cooperative progress has been made, some suggest that perhaps the extent to which it may be argued that the BRICS are an alternative to American global dominance may be overstated.

Lastly, there is the question of what the election of President Donald Trump means for American decline (Heilbrunn, 2018; Regilme, 2019). Obama’s liberal diplomatic skills and cooperative abilities may have helped manage or stay off American decline or helped the US into ‘declining politely’ (Quinn, 2011). By contrast, Trump’s conspiracy theory-led mindset, binge watching TV news habits, and stubborn, childlike attitude towards working with other world leaders seem to go against the broader post-World War II era American attitude of building consent with other world powers through a combination of carrots and sticks. Thus, Trump’s attitude seems to be sticks without carrots, going against the historical post-war trend of ‘liberal internationalism’ (Ikenberry, 2009).

Trump’s populist rise supported by many of the American elite—as perhaps Marx was right in saying the capitalist state could function as the executive committee of the bourgeoisie—seems to be one part of a broader rightward shift globally. From Erdoğan in Turkey to Duterte in the Philippines to Orbán in Hungary to Putin in Russia to Xi Jinping in

China to Modi in India to Bolsonaro in Brazil, and beyond, a slew of macho strong men, with generally anti-democratic, authoritarian tendencies and patriarchal, sexist, nationalist attitudes and politics have either come into power or strengthened previously held positions. But the extent to which they are willing to control their national ambitions and engage in cooperative efforts to build a coherent alternative to American hegemony is questionable.

In this context, it seems we are at a crossroads in the history of the modern world. If American power is in decline, might we see a resurgence of international conflict? Or might rising powers shift towards a multipolar or Eastern-centered global order building new networks of power outside of American hegemony? The next section will assess these questions, examining the ways that the United States continues to be the world's dominant power, but it is no longer as powerful as it was in decades past. What we may be seeing, then, is not a drastic collapse of American power so much as a gradual shift away from a US-centered global capitalism.

Challenges to American Power and Structural Transformations

American global power rests on several structural elements. Military might remains a key part of the equation, not simply as a means of coercion but also as a means of international cooperation as the US engages, for instance, in cooperative exercises with other countries. The American economy remains central to American power also, as its productive and financial basis provides the backbone of American domestic and international power. And in terms of social and cultural aspects, the ideal of the American Dream still brings immigrants over in a brain drain, and the image of American 'freedom' pervades the world.

The US is still the world's dominant military power by far. In August 2019, the US Congress passed a budget deal that constitutes the defense budget of 738 billion USD for fiscal year 2020, which will increase up to 740.5 billion USD in fiscal year 2021 (Roque 2019). The US also deploys troops in at least 175 states and territories and approximately 1,000 key military bases in 80 countries abroad (Swanson 2019, 3). As Jeff Bridoux notes, perceptions of power play an important role in world politics (Bridoux, 2018). If American politicians perceive their power is threatened or in decline, it may very well be the case that the US ramps up its military spending.

As a symbol of American power, the US currently has nine carrier striker groups spread across the planet (USNI, 2018). These groups have personnel of at least 7,500 soldiers, an aircraft carrier, and a wide variety of other ships including 6-10 destroyers, and 65-70 aircraft (Navy, 2018). These massive naval brigades contrast with, for instance, China's naval power as China acquired its first aircraft carrier in 2012 when they purchased an old Soviet model from Ukraine, although they may plan to have 5 aircraft carriers by 2025 (The Economic Times, 2018). Overall, this is one example of the ways that American military power continues to dwarf any rivals.

There are serious questions about the effectiveness of military power though. In the case of Iraq, the US spent around \$1.7 trillion and deployed over 115,000 soldiers in a large-scale war effort. The result has been the creation of a corrupt government that, it has been reported, supposedly has spent \$150 billion on weapons from 2006-2016 but acquired only \$20 billion of this (Silverstein 2016, 19). While Kurds have been fighting ISIS using old CIA weapons, terrorist organizations were able to acquire American arms delivered to Iraqi officials (Silverstein 2016, 19). Overall, the Iraq War and reconstruction of the country has benefited

elements of the American military industrial complex—most famously, companies including Haliburton—who drew great profits from the war, and has helped fund the pockets of corrupt Iraqi officials, but has done little if anything to strengthen American power; rather, if anything, the long-term result may be a reluctance of the US population to support more large scale American wars in the near future: the Vietnam Syndrome may become the Iraq Syndrome.

And it is not clear the war in Afghanistan has been any more successful. The US has spent \$750 billion on the war there, and \$126 billion on aid for reconstruction since 2002. At the same time opium production continues to skyrocket in Afghanistan. According to UN data, opium poppy production grew on 328,000 hectares in 2017 up from 201,000 hectares in 2016, meaning that potential production of opium rose to 9,000 tons (UNODC, 2018, 4). Like Iraq, it is unclear as to what extent American intervention in Afghanistan significantly bolstered American power. In both cases, the result seems to be endless quagmire rather than ‘success’ in the US military’s own terms.

US military power, though, does retain a cooperative element as well as a coercive one. For instance, to strengthen ally-ship, the US engages in joint military exercises with many countries around the world. To take one example, every year the US and Thailand run an exercise session called Cobra Gold. In 2018, 5,800 American service people were involved, and alongside the two countries, 29 ‘partner nations’ also were involved, either as participants or observers (Broadway, 2018). And the US retains alliances with many of its key partners, such as Japan, which has been under the US military umbrella since the end of WWII. Currently the US has about 54,000 military personnel in Japan, alongside 42,000 of their dependents and 8,000 civilians (USFJ, 2108). Hence, American military power remains central not simply as a form of US ‘hard power’ but through relations of global interdependency that make other countries consent to American global military dominance.

Economically, American gross domestic product as a percentage of the world’s total has declined over the last half century from 40 percent of the global total in 1960 to around 24 percent (Patton, 2016; Gramer, 2017). But in many global industries, American firms remain dominant. Sean Starrs (2018, 83-88) has calculated that as a percentage of the top 10 global firms, US companies take around 80 percent of global profits in the information technology sector, 66 percent in heavy machinery and aerospace, 63 percent in pharmaceuticals and specialized chemicals, although American car companies relative profit share in this regard has declined from 93 percent in 1963 to 23 percent by 2016. Additionally, a key aspect of globalization has been the internationalization of corporate ownership so that in some cases companies domiciled outside of the United States have American citizens in top positions (Starrs, 2018, 96).

In terms of global finance, Wall Street also continues to reign. Even the Great Recession, triggered by the collapse of the American housing market, did not stop investors from sending their money to the US. As Panitch and Gindin argue, “most remarkably, the crisis actually had the effect of strengthening the global role of the dollar” (2012, 318). Rather than pulling out, for instance, investors found US Treasury bonds to be a safe haven from the uncertainties of the collapsing financial sector as demand for these bonds increased as the rest of the economy shrank. And more recently, the US financial sector has hit record profits in 2018, the total number being \$62 billion in the third quarter alone (Reuters, 2018). While the number of Chinese billionaires has risen from 16 to 475 (in Greater China as a whole, 373 in mainland), the US still retains the most with 631 (Belamonte, 2018).

That being said, there are weaknesses in the American economy. For working- and middle-class Americans, the neoliberal era has been one of wage stagnation, rising debt, union decline, and increased job insecurity. The percentage of American workers in unions has fallen to 10.7 percent (Fingerhut, 2018). The real wages for most Americans have stagnated since the 1970s (Desilver, 2018). The overall result has been corporate profits have hit record highs, as more and more of the wealth produced in the US has been distributed as corporate profits rather than wage increases (Cohen, 2018). In what has been called ‘the new Gilded Age’ in the era from 1949 to 1973 the top 1 percent captured 4.9 percent of income growth and received 58.7 percent from 1973 to 2007 and 41.8 percent from 2005 to 2015 (Sommeiller and Price, 2018). This pattern of rising inequality continued after the Great Recession. It is no surprise that, by the end of 2016, “there were 9.4 million individuals with net worth between \$1 million and \$5 million, 1.3 million individuals with net worth between \$5 million and \$25 million, and 156,000 households with more than \$25 million in net worth” (Clifford, 2017, 5). As the wealth of the American ruling elite has continued to grow, for most working-class Americans, the decline of the American dream has been occurring for decades. And as class inequality continues to increase in the US, this could in the long run work to destabilize the social basis of American hegemony at home.

On the global stage, new international political-economic linkages are being shored up that could provide some alternative, however slight or drastic, to American international leadership. China’s annual GDP growth rate is still around 6.9 percent a year and, although no longer hitting the historically unprecedented 10 percent mark. This contrasts with the US’s 2.3 percent figure, as overall the 2017 growth rate for high income countries was around 2.2 percent, whereas it was 4.9 percent for middle income countries and 5.7 percent for low income countries (World Bank, 2018). Although this economic shift might not translate into a large-scale structural shift in the dynamics of political power in the short run, should this trend continue, to some extent, we will see a gradual, and still highly unequal and uneven, global leveling of incomes in the long run. Of course, China’s GDP per capita income based on purchasing power parity prices is still 1/3 of the US at 19,520\$ versus 64,770\$ (IMF 2019). And this leaves China highly dependent on exporting to foreign markets, as low wages and held back consumption levels could limit China’s ability to rise as a strong, independent power. Yet, the US has certainly gone through a relative economic decline over the last half century, even if in a gradual and piecemeal way.

On cultural and scientific influence, American power also continues to press an image of the American dream globally. For instance, China’s movie industry has grown significantly in recent years although the market share of Hollywood movies in China is still around 40 percent (Cain, 2017). In other words, although American power remains influential through media channels such as film, China is increasingly developing its own competitive national alternatives. This image however seems to become less inviting as Trump’s presidency has reinforced racism and anti-immigrant ideology. In Silicon Valley, for instance, 57 percent of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) workers currently come from abroad (Sheng, 2018). As Trump pushes to tighten visa restrictions, we may see a so-called ‘reverse brain drain’ as students trained in American universities from abroad go back to their home countries, both due to increasing anti-immigrant sentiment and racism in the US and as countries such as India and China can technologically compete with American science industry.

It seems less that we are seeing a short-term collapse or ‘terminal decline’ of US hegemony and more of a gradual, slow shift towards a less US-centric world order. And much

of how this plays out may depend specifically on the political, military, and economic relations between the world's two greatest powers: the US and China.

United-States China Rivalry

In the last two decades or so, several rising powers have emerged, and they have increasingly challenged the position of the United States as the status quo dominant power (Acharya, 2017; Parisot, 2013; Regilme & Hartmann, 2018). Russia, a challenger and reemerging power, deploys two long-term strategies of undermining America's position: namely, by counterbalancing through its membership in several regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and by delegitimizing America's political legitimacy in global governance (David, 2017). India, another rising power, remains a contentious electoral democratic state, and the US foreign policy establishment generally views this Asian state as a relatively peaceful, cooperative, and stable stakeholder (Van De Wetering, 2017). Meanwhile, Turkey's recent economic growth and assertive foreign policy render itself both as a key ally but also, in several ways, as an unpredictable challenger to American interests in the Middle East (Soyaltin & Gulmez, 2017). Projecting a conflicted identity, particularly as a middle power that seeks to promote Western liberal values, South Africa upholds, at times, pan-African ideals that oppose Western interventionism on supposedly 'African problems' (Hodzi, 2017).

In the Asia-Pacific region, American imperium has primarily relied on Japan's economic strength and political legitimacy in consolidating American interests in the region (Katzenstein, 2005). Tokyo's foreign policy has been moving away from traditionally being an ambit of Washington's security architecture, even though trying to avoid a 'regressive nationalist response' that could effectively activate Japan's potential ambitions for being a nuclear power (Bello, 2017). Japan's recent quest for becoming self-reliant in its military security is derived from the perceived threat posed by China's rise as a superpower vis-à-vis the corroding credibility of America's security guarantees under the Trump administration.

Among other emerging powers, China remains to be the most distinctive and perhaps the most credible challenger to US dominance in world politics. Widely considered as the 'most important rising power' (Hameiri & Jones, 2018), China has the world's largest population, the world's fastest growing economy, rapidly increasing military prowess and technological sophistication, and perhaps most notably, a dramatically different mode of political economy and governance compared to the US as a dominant status quo power (Jacques, 2009). Many Western pundits and politicians view China's fundamental differences in identity and vision for the world order, together with its rapidly strengthening military capabilities, as completely antithetical not only to the concrete economic and geostrategic interests of America but also to the key underpinnings of the US-dominated global governance system, i.e. 'free-market democracy'.

Of course, the appeal of America's legitimization claim ultimately depends on the sustainability of its economy that fuels its global security apparatus. The 2007/2008 financial crisis has indeed weakened the American economy but created an opportunity for China to emerge as the world's largest trade exporter, and its technological expertise as well as research initiatives continue to receive massive investments from the Chinese state. In an effort to fuel its economic growth in several decades to come, Beijing launched the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), which rivals the US-dominated World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Remarkably, the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative represents China's ambitious offer for development in the new millennium, in which partner countries in Asia,

Africa, and Europe receive infrastructure and various economic investments from Beijing. One of the intended outcomes of OBOR includes the enhancement of transport connectivity and economic cooperation as a new mechanism for national and regional development in the next few decades. Critics of OBOR, however, note that the initiative locks in aid recipient countries in ways that make their economic, political, and geostrategic imperatives more subservient to Beijing's interests. Another way of reading the OBOR constitutes the prospect that China is remaking the fundamental underpinnings of post-World War II global economic governance in ways that could depose the US as the core engine of the global economy.

Considering the scale of its economy and global ambition, China remains to be the most notable challenger to US dominance in global governance. As such, the future of the US-centered world order "will increasingly be influenced by the re-emergence of China as a major power on the world stage, and by the way in which the United States reacts to China's growing influence" (De Graaff & Van Apeldoorn, 2018, 113). Hence, the rise of China and the prospect of the decline of the US as a superpower raise the important question on whether such a transformation could be peaceful or violent (Ikenberry, 2008; Mearsheimer, 2006; Regilme & Parisot, 2017b; 2017a; Regilme, 2018c).

At the start of the new millennium, the US government actively expanded the scope of its military activities through security cooperation, counterterror exercises, and maritime security initiatives (Herman, 2011; Priest & Arkin, 2011; Regilme, 2018a; 2018b). Although such an expansion was primarily and initially triggered by the 9/11 terror attacks in the US, the emergence of the massive American security apparatus does not only serve counterterror measures both within the homeland and abroad, but it also functions as a key instrument for sustaining US dominance. No wonder that the US initiated a "strategy of reorientation toward Asia from the mid-2000s onward", which made the Obama administration's foreign policy reorientation towards Asia "both a belated labeling as well as an extension of that little recognized reorientation strategy" (Silove, 2016, 46).

In terms of geostrategic considerations, China's chances for dominance in the Asia-Pacific require the dismantling of America's "hub and spokes system of discrete, exclusive alliances with the Republic of Korea, the Republic of China, and Japan, a system that was distinct from the multilateral security alliances it preferred in Europe" (Cha, 2009, 158) as well as the other mutual defense treaty allies such as the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand. Despite China's challenge for regional hegemony, Southeast Asian elites and domestic publics generally uphold the well-entrenched belief that America's imperium in Asia is benign and beneficial (Hamilton-Hart, 2012). That pro-US socialization, however, is gradually eroding — with Thailand and the Philippines, both mutual defense treaty allies of the US, have been demonstrating blatant hedging behavior, and at many times, skewing their foreign policies towards China (Busbarat, 2018; Kausikan, 2017).

It is uncertain, however, whether the rise of reemerging powers and the eventual decline of American power would trigger a world war. Ikenberry (2018, 19) contends that America's dominance is entrenched upon by a "durable infrastructure" that constitutes "far-flung security alliances, market relations, liberal democratic solidarity, deeply rooted geopolitical alignments". Many, if not all, of these building blocks of American infrastructure are still intact, and therefore the emerging consensus that America is now in decline is indeed misguided. Ikenberry (2018) argues that not all rising states are revisionist to the extent that they seek to overhaul the system; instead, rising states could seek more access, authority, and control over global governance in ways that cooperate with the status quo power. In the case

of US-China rivalry, Ikenberry (2018) maintains that the current world order could peacefully accommodate China's rise because America's supposedly liberal international system constitutes integrative properties, structural opportunities for leadership and shared authority, diffusion of economic gains that are widely shared, and the tolerance for diversity.

In contrast to Ikenberry's optimistic view, John Mearsheimer (2016) argues that, if in case China's impressive economic growth continues in the next decades, then it is likely that Beijing will strive to achieve regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, hence pushing the US out of its traditional sphere of influence. This desire for regional hegemony is likely to increase the probability of a security competition between the US and China, and that could entail militarized conflict and violence. The case of the South China Sea (SCS) dispute offers a glimpse of the current quest for regional hegemony of Beijing. Considered as one of the world's busiest maritime routes, with almost 50% of the world's trade pass through, the SCS is a highly disputed region with several claimant states including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. Recently, the Chinese state leads the largest construction of artificial islands in the disputed SCS region, and it is the most assertive in demonstrating its naval capabilities compared to any claimant states (Regilme 2018b). Also, Beijing reinforces its claim over the region through a more assertive public diplomacy as it regularly rebukes other claimant states' claims. Such a development poses insecurity amongst smaller claimant states, many of which have depended upon the US for some form of political support and military security guarantees, most especially the Philippines. If Mearsheimer's prediction for security competition comes into fruition in the future, then it is very likely that the SCS could be the primary battleground for such a conflict.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the question of the implications of rising powers for the future of American global dominance. It has examined the strengths of American power, such as its historically unprecedented military might, remaining political and economic strength, and cultural appeal. But it also compared this with its weaknesses: relative economic decline, military ineffectiveness, and the potential of blatant racism and sexism to make the US a less appealing place for immigrants, among other issues. We discussed the ways in which rising powers may be providing an alternative to American hegemony, or at least a challenge to it. Specifically, we covered the ways in which tensions and rivalry with China in the Asia-Pacific region could play a key determining factor in the shape of contemporary and future global order.

It may be overly-determinist to suggest—as for instance hegemonic stability theories predict—that the modern capitalist international order structurally ‘needs’ a stabilizing, hegemonic power. Given the US's record of human rights abuses abroad and aggressive military adventures, it might be difficult to argue that US hegemony really ‘stabilized’ the international balance of power. It does however appear, at least, that the gradual and relative decline of American dominance correlates with an increase in global conflict, both actual and potential.

The future of global capitalism, in this regard, will be determined by the decisions of those in positions of power; as C. Wright Mills famously argued, the decisions of the ‘power elite’ weigh more heavily than those of the common person (Mills, 1956). But political decisions at the top are necessarily shaped by the social actions of working and middle class populations from below; protests and social action shape history as much as the sometimes

arbitrary decisions of political officials. Thus, the ultimate reaction to the shifting contours of global power depend, as well, on the ability of collective actors from below to challenge the injustices that are shaping international conflicts today. In the current context of rightward shifts towards patriarchal, ethno-nationalist, racist alt-right, the future of global cooperation for addressing global crises will be influenced by the counter-actions of social movements pushing against the forces that fuel global tensions and conflict (see Hosseini, Gills, Goodman, 2017).

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