

**RESEARCH PAPER****US Hegemonic Power and Future Prospects in Global Politics: A Study of the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan****Anosha Iqbal Butt**

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ABSTRACT

The research article aims to examine the influence of US withdrawal from Afghanistan on the US hegemonic position in the world. On 30th August 2021, after twenty years of its presence, the US officially ended the war in Afghanistan, exiting its troops from the Afghan land with the Afghan Taliban returning to power in Kabul. The withdrawal raised questions on the credibility of the US hegemonic power. To analyze the hegemonic position of the US, a qualitative approach and secondary data sources from journals, official reports and news articles are utilized. The 20-year war was a success as the US would not face any attack from terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda on its land. On the other hand, the long war on terror in Afghanistan was also aimed at nation-building and the spread of democracy, which the US failed to implement. The article argues that the US obsession with the Global War on Terror has damaged its hegemony and has led to the rise of counter-hegemonic forces. The US needs to reiterate its commitment towards its ideals of democracy, free market, and human rights in the changing global power dynamics to legitimize its position as a hegemon in the world.

KEYWORDS Afghanistan, Global War on Terror, Gramsci's theory of Hegemony, The US hegemony, Human Rights Violations

Introduction

In the second half of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) in Afghanistan, the United States (US) was having a to-and-fro approach. President Obama wanted to end the Afghanistan war but failed to make a deal. Donald Trump made the deal, an unsecured deal while Joe Biden made the withdrawal a reality. In 2014, the Obama administration decided to withdraw from Afghanistan however ended up launching the Resolute Support Mission in 2015 to strengthen the state structure of Afghanistan (Muzaffar, et. al. 2019; Branda, 2018). In 2018, the Trump administration went for peace talks with the Taliban (Jenkins, 2021). When President Biden came into power, Intra-Afghan talks had not reached any agreement yet Biden remained intact to the prior peace deal, happened between the Trump administration and the Taliban. On 30th August 2021, all forces withdrew from Afghanistan, along with the collapse of the Afghan Security Forces and democratic system (Al Jazeera, 2021).

After withdrawal, a debate started about whether the US power was in decline or was unchallenged. Daniel Kurtz wrote in the Foreign Affairs that the Global War on Terror has not eliminated the threat of terrorism, though it has succeeded in reducing the risk of attacks on US territory in the future. However, in its home, extremism has increased. The US is witnessing threats from white supremacists and far-right extremists (Kurtz, 2021). The US has bombarded trillions of dollars in its GWOT while ignoring all other growing threats to the US hegemony. The challenges that the world is now facing, are evolved while the US is still 20 years behind the world (Rhodes, 2021). On the other hand, the US has successfully weakened the terror networks so that they cannot be able

to resurge with the same strength. The technological revolution has made companies monitor data and block radical websites. It is quite ironic that the US has reduced the possibility of terrorism at its home while making an unstable Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Muzaffar, et. al. 2021; Byman, 2021).

The goals of the Global War on Terror conflicted with themselves throughout the years. When President Bush announced to widen the scope of GWOT by attacking Iraq in 2003, even its allies were in shock. They did not want to be in wars simultaneously in two states. The invasion of Iraq provided an opportunity for Al-Qaeda and the Taliban to re-organize themselves. When Obama withdrew the troops from Iraq, the power vacuum was filled by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). With the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban emerged as the champions of the country (Ackerman, 2021). Bush first described war as to end terrorism, later, said to promote democracy and American values in Afghanistan. Joe Biden, who led to a hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan said that the US has not had any intentions of nation-building in Afghanistan (Peters, 2021).

Therefore, withdrawal from Afghanistan marks an important event in the history of the US and the world. The US is again standing at a place where it has to define its ambitions in the world to make its hegemony survive in the world as it had done after the 9/11. I will deduce the US' hegemonic position in the world by analyzing its 20-year presence in Afghanistan under Gramsci's approach to hegemony. The Gramscian approach integrates hard and soft power elements to determine the hegemonic power of a state. The US might not enjoy the same power and legitimacy as it did at the start of the 21st century.

Literature Review

After the Second World War (WWII), Britain became bankrupt and lost the capability to manage world affairs. At that time, the United States came forward to lead the world. The involvement of the US in WWII after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor marked the era of US engagement. Truman's speech in Congress on March 12, 1947, was the official announcement that the US was ready to lead the world. This speech known as the Truman Doctrine in which Truman called out the tyrannical governments in the world and lauded the system of democracy, if not perfect but free from coercion (National Archives, 1947).

The US acquires an empire that does not have territory rather it's an ideological one. The ideas of democracy, free market, and human rights are enshrined in its foundations and the world wants to follow that path. The US has the world's highest military might, and its military alliances such as NATO also preached the US liberal ideas of cooperation and freedom. For the propagation of ideas through soft power, the US supported international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF) (E.Odom, 2007).

President Bush called "freedom" as America's gift to the world, and God's gift to humanity (Crawford, 2004). Francis Fukuyama, in his book, "The End of History and the Last Man", called liberal democracy, the end of the evolution of human history and the US, the last hegemon in the world (Betts, 2010). While, Leo Strauss commented that a rebellious group can change the discourse of history (Kampark, 2002), Fukuyama acknowledged that the world can move towards multi-polarity but the international system which has been established by the US would remain constant (Fukuyama, 1995). Owing to this reason, China cannot be considered competent to the US hegemony

because it has gained power in the US-led world order, therefore, it would not take a risk to counter those liberal institutions (Ikenberry, Mastanduno, & C. Wohlforth, 2009).

Unlike Ikenberry and Fukuyama, Huntington viewed the establishment of the US-led world order as the age of new conflict on the premises of the Clash of Civilizations. He put forward that the cultural suppression of others over the cultural dominance of the West would generate several conflicts in the world (Huntington, 1996). Robert Keohane, in his book, "After Hegemony", argued that the US has lost its economic position in the world. Every state has molded the liberal economic model to its own needs (O.Keohane, 2015). Robert Kagan analyzed that the US and Europe no longer share a common view of the world. The US is a state that follows the path of power, coercion, and a Hobbesian state while Europe is paving its way for perpetual peace as proposed by Immanuel Kant (Worth, 2015).

The institutions and ideas that Americans are proud of to make them a hegemon of the world, are not as significant as the geography of the United States. Being undisturbed by rivals because of lying between two vast oceans; the Atlantic, and the Pacific, the US enjoys having the strongest maritime power, capital, farmable land, and weather. The trade through water is cheaper, adding advantage to the economy of the US and its dominance of oceans not in its hemisphere but also its presence in Europe, and East Asia balances the power of any emerging rival (Ikenberry, 2014).

Currency is one of the main catalysts in the establishment of the US hegemony. The dollar helps the US to remain dominant in the business world. The US remained involved in foreign interventions, military ventures, and economic and humanitarian assistance to sustain its dollar hegemony (Costigon, Cottle, & Keys, 2017). The economy of the whole world is measured by its production of goods while the US produces dollars with which the rest of the world can trade these goods. With the US dollar at the center of the global economic system, the US will remain the central power in the world (Polychroniou, 1995).

On the other hand, the world has long ago changed its focus from geo-politics to geo-economics while the US consumed a significant portion of its budget on its external military interventions. These interventions have caused suffering to its people at home with the US being the most unequal society in the Northern Hemisphere according to Luxembourg Income Studies (Saull, 2012). The neoliberal economic model will bring crisis and instability in the absence of a hegemon because global capital is being divided into more than one state, resulting in the decline of the superpower. In response, the superpower will react fiercely which can create conflicts and instability in the economic world (Drezner & R. McNamara, 2013).

The financial crisis made states determined to start trading in currencies other than the dollar. Recently, China has been trading oil with Saudi Arabia in Yuan rather than dollars (Lei & Vizcaino, 2022). Scholars regarded Bretton Wood System II, established in 1971, as free market forces with minimal coordination that has brought wrath to states (Saull, 2012). Oswald Spengler believes that the West is in an irreversible declining period while the East is emerging as a significant model of prosperity. The liberal economic model brought economic inequality; foreign intervention caused dominance of the military; the discourse of "us vs. them" brought racial discrimination at home, and the rise of populist leaders, all paving the way towards the decline of the US (Acharya, 2017).

Material and Methods

The research is qualitative in nature with a mixed method of content analysis and documentary analysis. Content analysis is adopted by utilizing the articles from different journals of notable authors like Barry Buzan, Antonio Gramsci, Francis Fukuyama, and Robert Cox, etc., Some reports are used such as Afghanistan Papers by the Washington Post under the documentary analysis. For data collection, secondary resources have been used. Relevant data has been collected from books such as Rethinking Hegemony by Owen Worth, and Descent into Chaos by Ahmed Rashid.

Results and Discussion

Overview of Hegemony: Theories and Practices

Hegemony can be defined as a predominance of a state or a group of states over weaker states whether by the utilization of soft power (i.e., ideology, norms, culture, economic order) or by hard power (i.e., the use of force and coercion), conclusively creating an international structure that is compatible to sustain their power. Hegemony is also referred to as a state that has the most share of economic, military, political, and cultural influence (Muzaffar, et. al., 2017; Worth, 2015). The roots of the concept of “hegemony” came from the 5th-century Greek city-states. It is derived from ‘hegemonia’ which means ‘leader’. However, the term hegemony gained prominence in the 20th century with the work of Antonio Gramsci.

Scholars regard the initiation of hegemony from the Greek empire with Athens having the role of hegemon among other Greek city-states. The Roman Empire expanded itself with imperial agendas which provided privileges to Romans over non-Romans. Colonialism and mercantile policies remained the prominent features during the hegemonic period of Spain and Portugal. After the Thirty Years War in Europe, hegemony transferred to the Dutch East India Company which expanded itself across the continents with its mercantile policies. Under the British hegemony, the concept of comparative advantage, propagated by David Ricardo was adopted and international trade relations were set up (Worth, 2015). The World War I (WWI) ended the British hegemony and the world saw the gradual emergence of the US.

The theories of IR conceptualize hegemony on varying scales and dynamics while the use of influence either through soft or hard power remains consistent in understanding hegemony. In the liberal school of thought, hegemony exists as an alliance of certain states with the consensus from other states for the dominance of a certain type of international system which will ensure peace through its political leadership. On the other hand, Realists’ take on hegemony is largely centered on the military might and the concept of the dominance of one state in the world i.e., uni-polarity (Schmidt, 2021). Marxism approaches hegemony with the class struggle in which the upper class dominates the modes of production, and other institutions like education, media, etc., to exert its influence on the proletariat class. It exerts that proletariats should get the hegemony to bring revolution which Lenin called the dictatorship of proletariats (Lenin, 1992).

The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: A Case Study

With the presidential win, Obama made the US quit Iraq and developed a more focused policy toward Afghanistan. In this perspective, the US deployed more troops in Afghan territory. With the killing of Osama Bin Laden, Obama made a shift to transfer Afghanistan to its people under the policy of “Clear, Hold, Build, and Transfer” (Fair,

2010). On 1st January 2015, the Resolute Support Mission started to focus on Afghan nation-building. Donald Trump shifted his strategy towards South Asia and Afghanistan from a political settlement to a military approach. Therefore, on 19th September 2017, 3,000 more US troops were sent to Afghanistan with a total of 14,000 troops' presence in the country (Branda, 2018).

In July 2018, the Trump Administration reversed its policy with the desire to have negotiations with the Taliban. The Taliban's key demand was the removal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. The US also demanded to prevent Afghanistan from international terrorist organizations like Al-Qaida and ISIS (Rasouli, 2020). Lingered on the negotiations for two years and nine rounds of talks, a joint declaration was signed on 29th February 2020, in Qatar (Jenkins, 2021). Another deal was signed between the Afghan government and the US, in Doha where both parties have made consent to achieve peace in Afghanistan (Cordesman, 2021). Intra-Afghan talks were officially held in September 2020 in Doha. The negotiations faced disruptions due to the surge of violence by the Taliban over Afghan forces and civilians. Negotiations restarted in January but stopped due to the US election (Walsh, 2020).

In March 2021, new US President Joe Biden tried to have a conference in Turkey (Dobbins, 2021), regarding interim government but the Taliban remained unbothered (Boot, 2021). Thus, on 14th April 2021, President Joe Biden addressed at the White House. He said that Osama Bin Laden, the culprit has been punished therefore, the US would withdraw from Afghanistan (The White House, 2021). On 15th August 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul without any bloodshed, while Afghan President Ashraf Ghani left the country. Leaving the country again in the Taliban's hands, the Pentagon announced on 30th August 2021 that there were no US forces left in Afghanistan (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Theoretical Perspective

Antonio Gramsci belonged to the Italian Communist Party and was imprisoned by Mussolini from 1926 till 1937. During this period, Gramsci wrote some essays which later became famous as 'Prison Notebooks'. The term 'hegemony' was used by Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks after which it began to be used widely in International Relations (Bates, 1975). According to Gramsci, a specific group, first, exercises its leadership power with ideas, propagated by civil society and then exerts its hegemony with domination and coercion, through state institutions. Together, they create a dominant worldview that seemed universal. Gramsci said that when this domination is completely embedded in a society, then the chances of external coercion will nullify (Litowitz, 2000).

Gramsci's definition of hegemony is:

"The spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant groups; this consent is historically caused by the prestige which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production."

Gramsci also highlighted how a dominant class establishes its rule. Through Universalization, dominant class tends to make its ideas as beneficial for all human beings. Naturalism where nature and culture are used synonymously by the dominant class and masses thought that a certain culture is natural and universal and rebellion is a folly. In Rationalization, the dominant class produces intellectuals who further strengthen the existing worldview (Litowitz, 2000). Gramsci asserted that a deep-netted hegemony will survive any rebellion but any crisis situation will mobilize the masses and that war of movement will start at the ideological front.

Robert Cox further elaborated on the work of Gramsci. Cox identifies three forces that determine the structure of the world; ideas, institutions, and material capabilities. In the international world, a hegemonic state would have material capabilities, and institutions that claim to be universal (Burnham, 1991). In the work of Gramsci and Cox, civil society is the one that has control over the modes of production. Cox states that this civil society from hegemonic states penetrates other states as every state has a dominant class, and resultantly, creates a hegemonic worldview (D'Attoma, 2011). According to Cox, coherence and compatibility between state and civil society will ensure stability of the world order, while competition will lead to an unstable world order (Worth, 2015).

The Future of the American Power after its Withdrawal from Afghanistan: An Analysis of the US performance in Afghanistan

The Gramscian hegemony contains two elements, coercion and consensus. After the Cold War, the US had a consensual hegemony by the majority of states but certain states were not as submissive to the US led world order namely the Middle Eastern Muslim Countries. According to Gramsci, hegemon relies on the soft power until there is submission by the states. If any state retaliates, the hegemon will use coercive powers, in response. Resultantly, the US went into war with the Islamic Extremism.

With the 9/11 attacks, the US attacked Afghanistan, by getting international support. It was reported that terrorists got safe havens in Afghanistan. Rather than diplomacy, the Bush administration jumped into war with Al-Qaeda and Taliban in the graveyard of empires, Afghanistan. The US maintained that terrorism is threatening American unity, the notion of freedom, and democracy. Therefore, it is the right of a hegemon to wage war against the perpetrators. Thus, terrorism became a constant and dominating feature of the US foreign policy for 20 years despite other threats like climate change, economic crisis, and the rise of China.

While announcing Global War on Terror, the advisor of Bush said that the US is an empire, which creates its own reality to act upon its own wishes. I will analyze the 20 years of the US war in Afghanistan under Gramscian model of hegemony. For this purpose, US policies in Afghanistan are analyzed by segregating them into hard power, and soft power dynamics. The analyses will provide results of how much war has affected the US hegemonic power under Gramscian approach.

Utilization of Hard Power

Bush initiated War on Terrorism with the Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 against Al-Qaida in Afghanistan. The report that gave the idea of an attack on Afghanistan was made within weeks while nobody had the information about the society, culture, languages, and the history of Afghanistan. The influence of the Pentagon was overwhelming as compared to the State Department in decisions regarding war in Afghanistan as all decisions were taken by the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, while every piece of advice, given by Secretary of State, Collin Powell was suppressed (Rashid, 2008). The US got victory over the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, in partnership with the Northern Alliance (NA), in November 2001 by capturing Mazar-e-Sharif (Hammink, 2017).

For the reconstruction of the country, NATO allies divided the responsibilities. The US had to build a new army. Britain had the charge of counter-narcotics, Italy to rebuild the justice system, Japan to disarm militias, and Germany to rebuild the police. Nothing went as promised by these states. Britain could not control the production of opium because warlords were being protected by the US. Disarmament of militias was

also ineffective when the US used these militias for security services and provided them with weapons and money. The army had been developed but remained largely dependent on logistics and operational support from the US. In the end, it also fell apart with the US withdrawal. The only successful programs were education, the spread of media, and a new currency by the US (Rashid, 2008).

Despite Obama took initiatives for nation-building in Afghanistan, the figures showed little change. The proportion of the civil to military budget in 2006 was 1:17, which just changed to 1:10 in 2013 (Aaronson, 2014). Instead, the War on Terror created a terror industry in the US with 1,271 governmental and 1,931 private bodies linked to counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan (Jackson, 2014). Jobs of 30-40 percent of Americans are linked with the terror industry, a trillion-dollar investment. The end of the war means an economic halt for the country. That's why Noam Chomsky said that neo-liberal market forces are not in alignment with democracy (Chomsky, 2016).

At the end of 2015, the Taliban acquired control of 30 percent of the Afghan districts. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released its report which said that government forces had caused more civilian deaths i.e., 85 percent than the insurgent attacks. When Trump announced Peace Talks with the Taliban, they already had control over a large territory of the country (Cordesman, 2018). The so-called nation-building upon which the US and its NATO allies maintained their presence in Afghanistan, came to collapse the very moment when the US withdrew from the country. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces surrendered to the Taliban (Cordesman, 2021). It also established that the country cannot maintain itself without foreign aid which itself questions the 20 years of nation-building efforts by the US.

Utilization of Soft Power

Along with hard power, the US propagates its consensual domination in Afghanistan through the promotion of democracy, human rights, and a neo-liberal economic model. After the victory of the Northern Alliance (NA) and the US, the UN went forward with a democratic setup in the country. Bonn Talks were set up and Hamid Karzai became the president of Afghanistan. He failed to disarm militias instead they remained dominant in the politics of Afghanistan. They mostly had criminal records. Ismael Khan was a drug dealer. Hazrat Ali received money from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 1980s and later helped Osama Bin Laden escape from Tora Bora. Gul Agha Shirazi obtained money from the CIA while having relations with the Taliban. Hazara warlords received aid from Iran. Fahim, a Tajik warlord, was given the responsibility of the Defense Ministry. Thus overall, the government remained fragile while the warlords acquired more power and money from the US. Ahmed Rashid rightly pointed out that the US had freed Afghan people from the Taliban but put them in the cage of warlords, who were the most corrupt people in the country (Rashid, 2008).

Moreover, everything in the country remained the same as that of the Taliban regime; the violation of human rights, opium production, and warlords. The only change that the US had presented was a democratic setup which was practically undemocratic. The SIGAR 46th Quarterly Report mentioned the corruption and lack of political will in the Afghan political institutions (Cordesman, 2020). Not only did the US set a puppet government in Afghanistan but it also caused authoritarianism to strengthen in neighboring countries of Central Asia and Pakistan (Rhodes, 2021).

In the economic realm, the United States and to some extent, European states facilitated the state-building process in Afghanistan through a free market system. The economic policies widened the economic and social gap in the country. The government

of Afghanistan was largely dependent on foreign aid and debt to start any infrastructural projects and to run the state. Furthermore, the challenges of reconstruction and state-building were difficult with corrupt institutions, difficult security situations, and political instability as well as different social status and representation of Afghan people (Popalzai, 2013).

The US is alleged to have violated human rights treaties in Afghanistan. On Feb 7th, 2002, Bush declared captured terrorists and suspected terrorists as “illegal enemy combatants”, and thus refused to provide them the status of Prisoners of War (POW). The US had secret detention camps that were ill-famed Guantanamo Bay, Bagram Air Base, and the Former Ariana Hotel in Central Kabul (Rashid, 2008). Obama wanted to close Guantanamo Bay but at the end of his first tenure, 166 detainees were still present at the base. Prisoners had some rights when they were at Guantanamo but to suppress their rights, the US transferred them to Bagram Air Base where they would not have any rights (Chomsky, 2016). The lives of 3000 Americans caused the killing of 1.3 million people in GWOT in which many were innocents, along with a refugee burden for poor neighboring countries like Pakistan (Chomsky, 2016). Consequently, those attacks put a big question on the definition of morality by the US.

Conclusion and Recommendations

During the Cold War, there was a war of ideologies which led to the competition between the USSR and the US. In 1980s, the US disseminated radical Islamic ideology to achieve its hegemonic ambitions against the USSR. Thus, the US became a Hegemon by dividing the world into two conflicting ideologies i.e., Western liberalism, and radical Islam. After 9/11, the US used coercion on those extremist groups that it had produced itself, in order to maintain social control i.e., the US led world order. The 9/11 was an event when the US faced a challenge of alternative hegemony by Islamic radical groups. Robert Cox said that there won't be any chances of alternative hegemony if the existing world order is completely internalized. This illustrates that the hegemony of the US came under threat at the very moment when Al-Qaeda attacked on Twin Towers.

However, the US received international support for War on Terror because it is the most powerful state which is controlling the international institutions, and the propagation of ideas across the world. Moreover, extremist groups jumped into the use of force and threat rather than soft power due to which they faced resentment from the whole world even from the Muslim World. In Gramscian approach, ideas, institutions, and material capabilities determine the strength of the hegemon. The US has a dominant class which Noam Chomsky mocks as “the world”, the elite political class of Washington and London which determine the fate of the whole world (Chomsky, 2016). This civil society uses soft power tools to control the minds of the people. The concept of universalization, naturalism, and rationalization, made whole world to think that only other raising voices. This compelled the world to support the US War on Terror in Afghanistan.

After withdrawal, the Washington Post released Afghanistan Papers, assessing the US policies in Afghanistan. The US failed in Afghanistan because of fragile policies, and poor implementation. Moreover, Americans did not have the expertise of the Afghan society which hindered them a lot in processing, formulating, and executing already flawed policies (Thomas, 2020). If the US had succeeded in creating a stable Afghanistan from a failed rogue state, it would be called a triumph of a hegemon. While, in reality, the US left the country in a worst situation than before, which depicts that it failed to make its democracy, free market, and notion of freedom and human rights, universal,

and natural to the world. This failure gives a message to the world that US values are not universal and natural. The political, economic, and social systems can differ according to society.

To maintain a position of power in a rapidly changing world, the US needs to:

- Re-align its ideals of democracy, free market, and human rights with respect to the changing global power dynamics to present a soft image of the US to the world;
- Focus on strengthening its economic position to exert its influence upon the world through economic relations rather than the military ones;
- Show commitment for current global problems such as Climate Change and pandemics to reiterate itself as a responsible hegemon of the world; and
- Strengthen its ideals at home to get global legitimacy to lead the world.

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