



USA: It's not the State, it's the System

The 2008 recession, 9/11, the election of US President Trump, his decision to withdraw from international agreements, the rise of China; these events have been surrounded by a discussion of the USA as a hegemonic superpower and whether it's in decline.

This isn't surprising, considering the fact that discussions on the rise and fall of superpowers isn't new. In fact, if you take a look at the history of the hegemonic powers, it's expected. But it's worrying for the Western world, as it means a restructuring of their system and thus demands a change in the international order that will leave the participating states in chaos.

The issue is this: the discussion of the USA's decline is a complex one and it relies on the rise of an alternative system. This is because of the fact that the USA isn't just working as a state, it's working as a leader within a system that it created in the early 1900's. Whether an alternative system exists at the moment is a matter of contention. The argument in this article isn't that there can't be another system, it's that the rising powers, whether they be China, Russia or India aren't going to be the ones to bring it.

The Context

The current international system is in turmoil, with economists predicting another economic recession in 2020 and a number of political crisis across the world. In the middle of all this, with Trump's decisions to pursue more isolationist policies, is a debate regarding the status of the USA; are they still the hegemon? Or are there states that are rising against the USA to push themselves forward?

The basis of the current international system is a liberal version of democracy. This is under threat, with what the Western thinkers have entitled 'the rise of illiberalism'; i.e. an increasing distrust or apparent neglect of human rights.

The liberal democratic states are struggling to maintain power. Their citizens, the same citizens that the politicians rely on for power, are getting agitated by the increasing inequality. Politicians are struggling to maintain support and are using nationalism to maintain their citizens support- e.g. the case in India and Pakistan.

Why is the contextual discussion important in the discussion regarding the decline of the USA? It's because the USA is at the center of it all. As the leading state/ hegemon, it's seen as the state which has the resources, the ideas and the power that help to prop the current system up. If it's in decline, then the entire system is under threat.

US in Decline?

The main thrust of the argument that the USA is in decline is that it's struggling, economically. It's believed to be losing its competitive edge and having trouble due to the burdens that being an empire – a hegemon with control that's stretches across other states- place on it. These burdens are resulting in a variety of domestic problems; social, political and economic and as a result, they need to be managed.

Looking at the USA today, you can see that the USA is struggling politically. The entire 'America first' stance that Trump has adopted is designed to ensure that the political elites maintain support of their key supporters, and thus are able to continue its control in areas of foreign policy that are important to its dominance in the current system.

But this is to do with perception, and perception changes. Whatever, this perception may be the USA is still a dominant power in the international system. In 2003, there wasn't a

conventional force in the world that could fight a successful war against the USA, which accounted for 38% of all military expenditure in the world.

When it comes to economics, the story changes depending on the time period and the topic of discussion. The proponents of the declinist theory focus on the fact that USA's trade deficit has led to the continued decline in the US shares of global economic power and the internal systematic problems; it went from chief creditor to chief debtor.

But according to the Washington Post: "Today, the United States has a smaller slice a much, much, much larger pie. Their gross domestic product was about \$250 billion per year at the end of World War II; today, it is more than \$21 trillion. Adjusted for inflation, that's a sevenfold increase...Yet, the growth of German steel and toolmakers, of Japanese and South Korean automobile - and electronics-makers, of Chinese makers of low-cost goods have all been touted as evidence that the United States has lost its economic edge. After 75 years, the gap between the muscular economic reality and America's wan self-image is enormous. The United States continues to be the world's biggest economy by far - larger than China and Japan (No. 2 and No. 3 on the list) combined. Deloitte has forecast that the United States will replace China at the top of the Global Manufacturing Competitiveness Index by next year. Since 2003, the United States has added some \$3 trillion more to its economy than the European Union has managed."

This shows that the USA isn't as economically weak as the theorists who discuss its decline suggest. The problem isn't the economy, it's the rising level of inequality with the state. That doesn't affect the state's strength but it does impact its internal politics, which is why the USA is adopting nationalist policies to appease its voting class.

The key issue when discussing the decline of the USA is that looking at the USA as a state isn't enough. As Huntington stated, the problem with proponents of the declinist stance have been forecasting their decline since the 1950's and the capitalist system has yet to collapse. Their focus on the state stops them from being able to see the entire picture.

The important thing to remember is that the USA isn't acting on its own- it's a leader that has the support of the other states working within the system. As a hegemonic state, the USA created and maintained a system with various institutions and organizations to help them maintain and increase their influence. This has created a situation where states are working within the USA created and maintained system and thus lending it stability and legitimacy. The USA has been able to maintain this legitimacy by giving weaker nations a voice, reducing the greater power uncertainty and mitigating the security dilemma.

There are limits to US strength but that doesn't stop it from fulfilling its agenda and leading the system. This is explained through the fact that states, even ones like China, follow the USA and would be appalled if it withdrew completely- it laid the foundation to the world order. What this means is that USA hegemony isn't just based on its power as a state, it's on its integration and leadership of the system.

The UN is an example of this. In the simplest of terms, all the current states- whether, like China or Russia, they are a perceived enemy to the USA or whether like the United Kingdom they are an ally. Accepting the UN as a forum for discussion and a tool to help 'solve' states problems helps to augment the USA's power and legitimacy in the system that they created.

So, when Pakistan for example, agrees to work within the UN- it's giving the USA power.

The point is this: A hegemon rules through ideas. And it's one in which the political leadership is based on the consent of the led, which is secured by the diffusion and polarization of the world view of the ruling class. The system is maintained through coercion and consent both of which are aspects of power that are linked to the hegemon.

This means that the USA supports Liberal democracy, exporting it to states outside its borders. But in order for democracy to function in the states, it can't be enforced, it has to be accepted to ensure gradual political change rather than instability. The USA needs the support and acceptance of other states to continue its influence. And the states rely on the USA as they have accepted to work within the USA system and have an interest in maintaining it, for their own benefit.

This is why the rise in illiberalism, the threat of another recession and Trump's isolationist policies are of such an issue to politicians and political thinkers. They signal a decline in the system, an open liberal capitalist system which all states- big and small- have an interest in protecting.

The possibility of the USA based system declining has led to a discussion of possible alternatives.

The current discussions point to the possibility of states like China or Russia taking up the position of hegemon when the USA fails. The issue with this is that they forget or ignore one crucial element. They have accepted the current capitalist system, a system that the USA (with the help of its supporters) created in the post-World War 2 era. China, Russia, India; all are rising powers within the current capitalist system and thus they have an interest in maintaining it. As a result, they will always give the USA authority and will not challenge it when it means that the USA could collapse. They are rising powers, but they are rising within the current capitalist system and thus they don't present alternative options for a system that would lead to the collapse of the US based system.

In order for the situation to change, there's a need to upend the entire international system- changing the basis and dismantling the USA based system. This isn't impossible- it's happened before; a recent example was the collapse of the European colonialist system in the post-world war era.

In order to do this, it's not enough to change aspects of the system; you can't rely on challenging the USA and its allies by adopting a more illiberal approach to politics as Turkey is doing. Nor can you do it by increasing your political clout through economic policies as China is doing.

The aim needs to be to change the entire basis- to dismantle a rule based on manmade laws and replace it with a system that based on the laws given to us by Allah.

The Khilafah system (Caliphate), based on the method of the Prophet, is such a system. It's an alternative to the Western system; a system in which as Muslims, we would not aim to compromise to maintain power as the so-called Islamic states do today. Nor would we accept to be led by powerful Western states. Our focus would be abiding by the laws given to us by Allah through Islamic Shariah law; protecting our brothers and sisters and ensuring that we have success in this life and the Next.

﴿الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتْمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي وَرَضِيْتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا﴾

“Today I have perfected for you your religion and completed upon you My blessing and I have chosen for you Islam as [your] Deen.” [5:3]

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

Fatima Musab

Member of the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir