

The Rise and Fall of Hegemony in International Politics: Doctrine, History, and Strategic Self-awareness

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Abstract: In international political realist theory, hegemonic power emergence is the inevitable result of the self-help principle derived from anarchy. Therefore, this paper analyzes the rise and fall of power in different periods of history based on academic theories such as long cycle theory, power transition theory, and hegemonic stability theory, and concludes that restraint is the basic strategic self-awareness for each competing subject to avoid the premature outbreak of structural conflicts and ensure the peaceful and stable development of the country.

Keywords: *International Politics, Hegemony, Competition, Restraint*

1. Introduction

The expansion of states and the international conflicts resulting from inter-state expansion have always been the driving force of international politics, and the rise and fall of hegemony in each phase of history has lessons for the present. Therefore, this paper uses some classical theories of international politics to analyze the hegemonic powers in different historical periods in order to find the internal logic of the rise and fall of hegemony and to draw the strategic self-awareness that the current hegemonic powers should have.

2. Doctrinal Perspective on the Rise and Fall of Hegemony

From a realist perspective, the strategic preferences and actions of international political actors are essentially based on the prerequisite of satisfying their survival interests, and the interactions are more often expressed in the competition for scarce resources. Thus, according to the logic of "power and security are positively correlated", competition becomes the inevitable result of the security needs of powerful

countries. These points can also be considered the inevitable result of international anarchy. In this regard, Kenneth Waltz has pointed out that the nature of international anarchy has led to remarkable similarities in international political life over the centuries[1]. The expansion of power by hegemonic powers has never ceased throughout history, and although their strategic choices have been more or less resilient, they have all been unable to avoid the strategic overdraft that has led to the rise and fall of hegemony. This can be almost a very strikingly repetitive phenomenon in contemporary international interactions.

At the same time, similarity in international politics is not only reflected in the eternal nature of power competition, but also in the process of growth and change of hegemony. It can be said that the phenomenon and mechanism of hegemony are the logical extensions and natural result of the competition between powerful states. The popular theories of hegemony can be summarized as the long cycle theory, world system theory, power transition theory, and hegemonic stability theory.

The Long Cycle theory of hegemony, proposed by George Modelski, sets out four basic propositions of the hegemonic cycle: first, the global system needs a leader; second, global

leaders are born out of international wars; third, naval power is a requirement for world leaders; and fourth, the evolutionary pattern of international politics is "cyclical", with the cycle of the international system dominated by world leaders lasting about 100-120 years.[2]

Immanuel Wallerstein also pointed out in his world system theory that hegemonic states are hegemonic because of their economic superiority, which consists of three aspects: "agro-industrial, commercial, and financial advantages. It is these three aspects that determine the hegemonic state to pursue a free market economy during its hegemonic cycle, and thus to obtain the greatest benefits in the international economic system based on free trade; he also believes that war is the ultimate means for the hegemonic state to maintain its economic dominance.[3]

The Power Transition Theory, mainly represented by A. F. Kenneth Organski, assumes that there are three general stages of hegemonic transition: first, the emergence of a potential rising state; second, the rapid accumulation of power in this potential state through industrialization; and third, the maturation of the rising state. At the same time, the previously dominant state begins to decline in relative terms, and a race for power inevitably ensues.[4]

Charles P. Kindleberger concluded that the reason for the collapse of the world economic order in this period was the inability of Britain and the unwillingness of the United States to play a stabilizing function. For the stable operation of the world economic order, there should be one and only one stabilizer to play such a leading role.[5]

Synthesizing the above popular theoretical claims of hegemony, the rise and fall of hegemony can be roughly divided into four stages: first, the stage of global war, in which world wars lead to the decline of the global organizational structure; second, the stage of the emergence of a world power, in which the victor of the war arranges the political system through legitimate treaties, thus establishing a new world order centered on a new world leadership; third, the stage of loss of legitimacy: the world leader declines and a two-tier world order is formed, followed by a multi-tier one; its fourth, the stage of power decentralization: the multi-tier competition weakens the global organizational structure again and creates conditions for the emergence of the next world leader. In addition to this, the growth and decay of each hegemony are quite similar. In general, the initial hegemonic power is established by developing its global production technology leadership, which leads to the acquisition of dominance in the field of commerce and trade as well as in world finance. Afterward, they make full use of their production advantages to expand foreign trade and create trade surpluses, adjust their industrial structure to transfer low-end production lines through further capital accumulation, and peddle their technology and culture to maintain hegemony. However, the recipient countries in the technology diffusion also rapidly increase their strength, reach the production level of the existing hegemony and compete with them in a shorter period. But because the challenger country is directly acquiring the existing technology, it has more capacity and capital to invest in

innovation, and the original hegemon needs to pay more to maintain its dominant global system, so the original hegemon is often easily replaced.

3. A Historical Review of the Rise and Fall of Hegemony

The cycle of the rise and fall of hegemony can be best seen on both sides of the Atlantic from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, from the colonial hegemony of Portugal to the establishment of a global system dominated by the United States, each successive hegemonic change conforming to the above logic.

3.1. The Rise and Fall of Hegemony in the Pre-modern World

From the fifteenth century to the twentieth century, a world colonial hegemony and global system dominated by Portugal, the Netherlands, and Great Britain emerged in Europe one after another. At the end of the fifteenth century, the first world leader, Portugal, gradually emerged. Portugal was located in the heart of the Iberian Peninsula, an active participant in the Mediterranean and North Sea trade networks, and a pioneer of the great maritime movement, occupying a large number of islands in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, and dominating the ocean trade. And Portugal's supremacy was fought through a global war.

Before Portugal, inter-Asian and European trade and transportation were relegated to the Muslim world, with goods converging in Venice on the European continent. In the 23-year war of 1494-1516, Portugal defeated the Mamluk dynasty of Egypt and its backers, the Venetian Republic. The Portuguese royal family, represented by Prince Henry the Navigator, was determined to break away from the old system of intercontinental commerce and explored and surveyed the Atlantic and West African coasts. With the arrival of Vasco da Gama in India and the end of a series of naval battles for spheres of influence, the Kingdom of Portugal gradually established its dominant transoceanic trade system and maritime hegemony. This expansion was accompanied by the development of Portugal's maritime technology, and naval power, the accumulation of national capital, and the establishment of an embryonic global system[6].

However, before Portugal could fill its own "empire" elements, the equally hasty entry of Spain made the embryonic empire collapse, but the Netherlands, which had been acting as a "middleman" between Portugal, Spain, and the rest of the continent at the previous stage, rose rapidly. Like Portugal, the rise of the Netherlands was not always smooth. In 1580-1609, the Netherlands received the dividends of the development of navigation technology and the huge profits of trade in the War of Independence. Based on this, the Netherlands had a near monopoly of trade between Europe and the Baltic Sea in the 17th century, integrating America, Asia, and Africa into its network of

interests and establishing a joint-stock colonial trading company. At the same time, shipbuilding technology also developed significantly. At the peak of Dutch naval power, three-quarters of Europe's ocean-going merchant ships flew the Dutch flag, and most of the remaining countries' own intercontinental merchant fleets chose to import ships from Dutch shipyards. In addition, its unique geographical advantage makes it a natural trading condition - the Netherlands has a very well-developed transportation water system and many natural transit ports. At the same time, the Dutch government had strong commercial credit worldwide, and its establishment of banks, stock exchanges, insurance companies, and commodity exchanges gave rise to the modern financial and trading system and banking industry in the later years.

However, even though the development of Dutch finance was based on an open and free economic environment, this overly open environment led to the decline of Dutch finance. After the Netherlands started colonial trade and expansion, countries successively seized the colonial market by lowering tariffs. Therefore, although the Netherlands had a well-developed financial industry, it gradually took a disadvantage in trade, and the intensification of foreign trade competition made the Netherlands gradually lose its status as an economic power. Although the Dutch banking industry was very profitable for the Netherlands, the later lending of Dutch banks to foreign countries led to a significant loss of capital in the country. In this way, the Dutch lending to other countries seemed to be a normal business of the Dutch banks, but due to the lack of global authority in the international arena, their repayment negotiations and late penalties were ineffective, and in fact, they provided a lot of public goods to help the national development of other competing countries at the "expense" of themselves. Just as it enjoyed the expansion dividends of Portugal and Spain. Not only that, but because of international anarchy, the borrowing country holds the initiative to repay the loan. The Netherlands had no choice but to maintain good relations with them to recover the principal and interest on the loans. As a result, the strategic burden on the country deepened, the country's liquid capital continued to leak out and its development slowed down. In its expansion, the Netherlands sought not to dominate the world, but to become the center of the global trade market. But eventually, the balance of payments collapsed, which inevitably led to its downfall.

In terms of the basis for expansion, the Netherlands and Portugal were very similar: the basic conditions for establishing a global system were weak, the total population was small, and the expansion to a global scale was affected by internal divisions, and the advantages generated by the ports were gradually reduced. In the second half of the seventeenth century, with the combined challenge of an increasingly powerful challenger, England, which enjoyed the dividends, and France, which had risen in the Thirty Years' War, a situation similar to that experienced by Portugal in the second half of the sixteenth century emerged - a country amid its expansion, but inevitably contributing to the takeover by a neighboring country more powerful than

itself dominant position in the global system. When the former hegemonic power and the competing power were defeated, the British "came to the top" as a matter of course. Based on the early geographic discoveries and the colonial expansion of the two declining dominant global systems, Britain established "the sunset empire" by virtue of its sound industrial and commercial system, its advanced constitutional system established through the Glorious Revolution, and its unique geographical advantage, as well as its policy of "continental equilibrium" towards its main competitors in Europe. However, Britain won the Seven Years' War, a crucial battle for hegemony with France, by depleting its hegemonic power. The British policy towards the North American colonies prior to the Seven Years' War was one of "A welcome neglect"[7], or "not disturbing the sleeping dog". This gave Britain's North American colonies a great deal of room to strengthen themselves, and under this premise, Britain's taxation of the "free" colonies to pass on the crisis brought about by the war inevitably intensified the conflict between itself and the North American colonies, and the potential pitfalls of over-expansion made the costs greater than the benefits to the country began to appear. --Thirteen years after the Seven Years' War (1776), the United States declared independence and gradually took over the baton of hegemony.

3.2. A Re-Examination of British and American Hegemonic Formations

The process of the transition of British and American hegemony can be roughly divided into three stages:

The first stage was the rivalry between Britain and the United States. From 1783 to the end of the nineteenth century, this period was dominated by conflicts and disputes between Britain and the United States, and there were constant power struggles. After American independence, Britain ended its colonial rule in the United States but did not give up the idea of regaining control of the original colonies, and the two sides often clashed. The Second Anglo-American War of 1812-1814 is a typical example.

The war was fought at the height of the Napoleonic Wars when the overall international situation was extremely favorable to the United States, and Britain was tired of fighting on two fronts, with an increased strategic overdraft. Even after Napoleon was defeated by the Anti-French League in June 1814, Britain began to concentrate its forces on the United States, eventually capturing Washington and burning down the White House and the Capitol. And in naval battles, Britain used its powerful navy to blockade the coast south of New England. But the final result of the war made both sides realize that they could not defeat each other, and it was difficult for Britain to defeat the United States with strength, which laid the foundation for the transfer of British hegemony to the United States in the 19th century. At the same time, the United States, taking the war and the current situation of strategic overdraft of the "former" mother country as a lesson, launched the "Monroe Doctrine" in 1823, and throughout the 19th century, the United States

maintained an expansion strategy of avoiding the strong and attacking the weak. The United States maintained a strategy of expansion throughout the nineteenth century, not interfering in European affairs, but also gradually establishing an "American system" in the Americas that would benefit the United States of America. The purpose of the "Monroe Doctrine" is not to measure American power, but to explain the position of power it aspires to. All the Western European powers challenged the Monroe Doctrine; and the threat of these countries failed to materialize because, in addition to the growing power of the United States, their concern for old-world parity played an equal or greater role[8]. For example, in 1846 the United States launched a war against Mexico, claiming a large amount of Mexican territory. After the start of the Civil War, Britain and the United States again confronted each other. During the war, although Britain did not participate directly in the war, it supplied arms and materials to the southern states, causing great damage to the unified northern government. This was a side effect of the decline of Britain's ability to intervene directly in America.

The second stage was a coexistence of cooperation and conflict between Britain and the United States. In general, the two countries chose a short period of "peace" for their survival. From the end of the nineteenth century to the end of World War I, Britain's power declined as a result of the war, and as a result of its long international isolation, it urgently sought help from the United States in the face of challenges from the rising powers of the continent. Unlike its "predecessor," the United States continued to gain strength after the parting of ways through the Second Industrial Revolution and avoided the attrition of the Great War by pursuing an isolationist policy in World War I. In terms of economics and commerce, the United States grew in weight in the global economic system as a result of a revolution in wealth generation brought about by the outbreak of the Second Industrial Revolution, with the booming of the electric, steel, and chemical industries and the replacement of trade by industrial production as the most efficient and fastest way to add value to wealth. On the military front, in the 1890s Mahan put forward his famous doctrine of naval power as an essential factor in a nation's development[9], and the United States did gradually establish maritime dominance. In contrast, Britain's control over its colonies around the world began to decline during this period, and its established maritime hegemony was constantly under attack. All of the above became the basis for the cooperation between Britain and the United States. At the end of the 19th century, the Anglo-Boer War between Britain and the Boers over the South African colonies in Africa met with global opposition, but Britain and the United States cooperated secretly to trade and profit together. In the Americas, the Spanish-American War was strongly opposed by European countries, but Britain was not only neutral but also secretly lent a helping hand to the United States. Britain and the United States moved toward reconciliation during this period, supporting each other in the international struggle for public resources, based on Britain's isolated position in the

international arena, the historical origins and linguistic and cultural similarities between Britain and the United States - both countries considered themselves excellent Anglo-Saxon nations - and the United States' concern for their own sufficiently reasonable considerations of their power at the time.

The third stage was the peaceful alternation of British and American power. From the end of World War I to the end of World War II, Britain paid a high price for maintaining global dominance beyond its affordable costs, resulting in the complete collapse of the previously dominant global system due to factors such as the inability of domestic production to supply demand, the continuous loss of overseas assets due to over-expansion, the shrinking of overseas markets due to the erosion of dominance, the massive attrition of armies and the depletion of weapons, and the backlash from the colonies. In contrast, the United States had already surpassed the British Empire in terms of economic aggregates and became the largest creditor through its profit maximization strategy in World War I and the advancement of the Second Industrial Revolution. At the Paris Peace Conference after World War I, U.S. President Wilson proposed the "Fourteen-Point Plan" in an effort to build a new international political and economic order and to clarify the transfer of hegemony. The most typical event was the opening speech of the Washington Conference, in which Secretary of State Hughes proposed to limit the naval armament program and proposed the rationing of the world's major naval forces in response to the interplay of regional power. By the end of World War II, the United States had established the United Nations (UN), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the Bretton Woods system, three global rules that marked its hegemonic status, and the U.S. and Britain had finally completed the transfer of hegemony.

By comparing the history of the four hegemonic changes, one can see the similarities between the current hegemon, the United States, and the two maritime hegemons, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. U.S. hegemony "is based on leadership in dominant economic and technological fields, not on mere economic size and military superiority, and this leadership is achieved and maintained in an open system." [10] In addition, the expansion and stability of U.S. hegemony are dependent on its own institutional arrangements, and it maintains self-restraint in its strategic formulation and choice of path. The promotion of the Pan-American system and the inheritance and leadership of the "open door" policy are typical examples of this. Therefore, the imperial form of the United States has included the element of "institutional hegemony" from the very beginning. Moreover, the U.S. differs in that the size of the colonies occupied by all hegemonic powers in the struggle for sea power can most clearly reflect the control of traditional hegemony over sea power. In contrast, the United States has jumped out of the hegemonic trap of reliance on territorial expansion and has built its hegemony into the invisible realm of finance and trade or international influence, avoiding the same overextension as previous hegemonies. It gives its hegemony an indestructible potential. As Qiyu Xu said: "As

a hegemonic power, the United States has built the world's most powerful military machine, and the main way to expand and exert influence overseas has shifted from trade to more covert and penetrating forces such as finance and culture.” [11]

4. Conclusion: Strategic Self-awareness of the Rise and Fall of Hegemony

The peaceful alternation of British and U.S. hegemony and the flexible adjustment of U.S. strategy during expansion has served as a model for later countries. The United States' natural oceanic barrier and the geopolitical environment without land-based powers in the vicinity have made it more secure while at the same time obliging U.S. strategy makers to carefully consider the cost of its offshore expansion and its own ability to pay for it when planning. Therefore, in the face of the established hegemony, the United States has chosen strategic contraction when it does not have sufficient capacity to cope - or its own capacity to challenge the established hegemony is not sufficient to ensure that the status quo can still be maintained even if it fails.

Graham Allison defines strategy as maintaining a balance of ends and means.[12] In addition to this, Professor Yinong Shi also particularly emphasized the primacy of balance - "Whether it is 'strategic military' or 'strategic economic', there is a major inherent balance between 'strategic impetus' and 'strategic prudence', which essentially involves the ability to prevent 'strategic overdraft' ".[13] Since the emergence of nation-states, competition, and cooperation between different states have taken different forms and revolved around different areas at different times, but when acting as a single actor in the international community, and behavior of any state should be fundamentally based on the preservation of existing core national interests and security and the realization of expected national gains. While it may be appropriate for the "chivalrous" within a country to do what they know they cannot do, when a country (especially a major power) is planning for its own survival as a unified actor in the international community, if it cannot exercise rational restraint, strategic overspending will not only increase its burden but also lead to an overall tension in the international situation. For instance, the audience cost theory proposed by the American political scientist James Fearon emphasizes that if a country's leaders lack strategic restraint and arbitrarily escalate a diplomatic crisis, they will have to bear serious domestic political costs in the event of a strategic backdown.[14] In this theory, democracies with "Brezhnevism's paralysis"[15] tend to bear the audience cost easily. Nevertheless, some of the non-democratic emerging powers are more likely to suffer from a loss of domestic credibility and the consequences of a crisis.

In summary, the rise and fall of hegemony under realist thinking may be unavoidable, but the precedents of previous generations are still fresh in our minds, and sensible later generations should learn to learn from them.

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