

## **Examine the view that US leadership in the international order is based on a benevolent imperialism**

American hegemonic control over the post-war multilateral economic system has been defined by two factors: US dominance over global economic markets and institutions, and its military might as a superpower currently unrivaled in unipolarity. While this has positively expanded capitalism in an intensified era of globalization, it has also promulgated patterns of structural hierarchy and inequality. Moreover, the Bush administration's War on Terror with its contingent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have renewed attempts to define America's hegemonic culture. Some scholars view US leadership as self-serving, asserting that "American neoliberal 'free trade' is asymmetrical" (Callinicos, 2009: 193) and that America is "a military juggernaut intent on world domination" (Johnson, 2004: 4). Others argue that the American imperialist order is a peaceful, open and integrative system (Ferguson, 2004: 2) whose militaristic engagements to securitize operational integrity are "not only necessary and inevitable, but good" (Barnett, 2007).

This paper argues that because US power is extraordinary and development among nations in the modern era of globalization is uneven, US leadership in the international order is not necessarily benevolent. However, neither is it wholly dysfunctional or undesirable. Rather, the US American political order is more pragmatic and ultimately its liberal, integrationist means function to prioritize its imperialist ends, that being the maintenance of the global political order in order to preserve US interests and primacy.

First, I will identify the current semblance of sovereignty within the contemporary international order in order to give context to the discussion. Second, I will argue that the character of US foreign policy is more than benign hegemony and should indeed be seen as inherently imperial by nature. Third, I will debate the cost-benefit effects of US imperialism in the global political system through analysis of how the US has brought its economic, geopolitical, and military power to bear in its unprecedented position as a global superpower.

Although distinct schools of thought have emerged over the globalized fate of the world, there is consensus that globalization, broadly defined as "the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life" (Held, 1999: 1) has transformed the meaning of sovereignty for the nation-state. Traditionally, sovereignty has meant the territorially exclusive authority of

a state to govern itself. Today, “hyperglobalists” see sovereignty as having been denationalized by the liberalized marketplace and therefore has a negligible role to play (Held, 1999: 3). “Sceptics” on the other hand, still hold the traditional concept of state sovereignty as they view nation states as the primary architects of globalization and therefore sees them in firm control of the US multilateral economic order (Held, 1999: 1). Yet, as this paper will later show, states indeed are, to an extent, subordinate to a highly internationalized marketplace, but crucially they retain significant political and social agency within the system. Therefore, per “transformationalist” thought, state sovereignty under the aegis of US leadership in the globalized era has been reengineered and can be accepted “less as a territorially defined barrier than a bargaining resource for a politics characterized by complex transnational networks” (Keohane in Held, 1999: 9). It is this definition of state sovereignty that allows the US state — as the hegemonic architect and arbiter of the global liberal order — to leverage its primacy vis-a-vis other states’ sovereignty in order to preserve a hierarchical international division of labor between capitalist First World states (the “core”) and developing nations (the “periphery”) that stimulates a variety of capitalist market outcomes worldwide. This process may be called “imperialism” (Gulalp in Kiely 1995: 58).

US administrations — Democratic and Republican alike — refute characterizations of US foreign policy as imperialistic. Samuel Berger, Bill Clinton's national security adviser, maintained that the US is “the first global power in history that is not an imperial power”, while George W. Bush echoed that “America has never been an empire. ... [it] may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused.” (Ferguson, 2003). And despite the storied American tradition for preemptive, ad hoc military interventions in peripheral states from Latin America to Asia to the Middle East, US commitment to a multilateral, integrationist international order seems to align its primacy with “hegemony” in the benign, Gramscian sense of leadership through ideas more than through force. But many variants of “empire” have existed throughout history. Berger and Bush are disavowing traditional “empire” full of conquest and colonization — concepts that are antithetical to ideals of the American experience. The modern definition of empire can broadly be seen as a “centralized, hierarchical system of rule acquired and maintained by coercion through which a core territory dominates peripheral territories” (Mann, 2008: 8). By this yardstick, America’s preventative war breaching of state sovereignty in Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, Panama, Grenada, Cuba, and so on must qualify as imperial behavior. Moreover, what both Berger and Bush also overlook is that powers of coercion need not be militaristic.