

# Dollars, Arms, Words: Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Hegemony

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the foreign policy of Barack Obama and the basic elements and contours of what can be described as a putative “Obama Doctrine”. It argues that, while never precisely stated and outlined, this doctrine constituted an attempt to come to terms with the final manifestation of some ingrained and, after the 2008 global economic crisis, inescapable contradictions and flaws of the model of hegemony the United States had built and projected since the 1970s. To address this novel situation, and the multiple arcs of crisis the U.S. was facing, a radical strategic, diplomatic and discursive shift was needed. Cognisant of it, Obama pursued this change, although not always consistently or successfully, achieving results that appear all the more remarkable when compared with the foreign policies of his predecessor and, after almost two years in office, his successor.

**Keywords:** Hegemony; Power; United States; Barack Obama; Crisis; Primacy; Consumption;

Trying to make sense of Barack Obama’s foreign policy requires historicising it: examining how it represented a forced attempt to address the intrinsic, and in 2009 visible and inescapable, dilemmas and contradictions of American hegemony. Such hegemony underwent a major transformation in the late 1970s/early 1980s, after a decade when the Vietnam fiasco, the collapse of the U.S.-centred Bretton Woods monetary regime, the decreasing competitiveness of the US industrial sector and the multiple troubles of the American economy had led many to predict an inevitable decline of America’s power and influence.<sup>1</sup>

I use here a fairly loose and non-dogmatic definition of hegemony: a historical (and historian’s) understanding of the concept. I therefore define hegemony as the ability of a specific subject – in this case the United States – to project and maintain its dominance by force and consent, through the negotiation of a specific international order acceptable (or at least tolerable) to the other main actors of the system, and supported by a broad consensus, social and political, at home (by a broad “historical bloc” or “social bloc of forces,” to use what is still a valid, and often overlooked, Gramscian category). Such “consensual hegemony” is thus exercised through a

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1 Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s. A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2011; Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed. The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2015; Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment. U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2016.

plurality of factors – economic, cultural, military, and political – that render the power of the hegemon multidimensional, pervasive and ultimately effective.<sup>2</sup>

In a nutshell, we can say that this post-1970s renewed hegemony rested on a redefinition of the *modus operandi* of U.S. post-World War II primacy's three basic pillars: monetary dominance; ideological and discursive clarity; and military preponderance. In the early 1980s, skyrocketing interest rates, a strong dollar and intense deregulation converged in intensifying and accelerating the metamorphosis of the United States from an "empire of production" into an "empire of consumption". The U.S. went from being the most advanced, paradigmatic stage of industrial modernity to becoming a post-industrial superpower that had, in its insatiable and ever-expanding domestic market, a key hegemonic asset: the primary driver of global growth, which export-led economies were eager, and prone to subsidise and feed.<sup>3</sup> Domestic mobilisation around (and support for) an interventionist, global and inevitably costly foreign policy was pursued via a sanguine, nationalist and often binary rhetoric that rejected the dominant discourse of limits that every administration of the 1970s (Nixon, Ford and Carter) had, in one way or another, spoken.<sup>4</sup> Military sufficiency and the contextual contraction of the defence budget – so central in the policies pursued in the previous decade to address what was considered to be the now unsustainable military costs of the Cold War – gave way to rearmament and the search for a full-spectrum dominance, which would mark most U.S. grand strategies of the following three decades.<sup>5</sup>

When observed today, the post-1980s hegemony of the United States, successful as it was on multiple counts, reveals various contradictions and fragilities, of which many contemporary observers were all too aware.<sup>6</sup>

From the mid-1970s, consumption of services as well as durable and non-durable goods skyrocketed, tripling or quadrupling in little more than a decade, with

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- 2 On the notion of a "consensual" U.S. "hegemony" during the Cold War see Charles Maier, 'Alliance and Autonomy. European Identity and United States Foreign Policy Objectives in the Truman Years' in Michael J. Lacey (ed.), *The Truman Presidency*, New York/Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 273–298. See also Giovanni Arrighi, 'The World Economy and the Cold War, 1970–1990' in Melvin P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: III: Endings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 23–44; Robert W. Cox, 'Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: an Essay in Method' *Millennium, Journal of International Studies* 2, 1983, pp. 162–175; Eugenia Baroncelli, Mario Del Pero, Giancarlo Schirru and Giuseppe Vacca (eds.), *Studi gramsciani nel mondo: le relazioni internazionali*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010.
  - 3 Charles Maier, *Among Empires. American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2006; Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing. Lineages of the XXI Century*, London, Verso, 2007; Thomas W. Zeiler, 'Opening Doors in the World Economy in Akira Iriye (ed.), *Global Interdependence. The World After 1945*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2014; Thomas Oatley, *A Political Economy of American Hegemony. Buildups, Booms, and Busts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.
  - 4 Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out in the Blue. Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000; Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 15–39; Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era. A History of the 1980s*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015.
  - 5 John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment. A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, 2nd ed.; Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, op.cit.
  - 6 For four very different examples see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York, Random House, 1987; Stephen Gill, 'American Hegemony: its Limits and Prospects in the Reagan Era', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 15, 1986, pp. 311–336; Susan Strange, 'The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony', *International Organization*, 4, Autumn 1987, pp. 551–574; Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century. Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, London, Verso, 1994.