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

Mario Del Pero
Sciences Po Paris

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.¹

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 “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

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

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.3 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.4 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.5

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.6

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

---


