Old Hegemons, New Challenges and the Limits of Traditional Responses

We do not seek to impose any system of government on any other nation, but we also don’t believe that the principles we stand for are unique to our nation... These freedoms of expression and worship, of access to information and political participation – we believe are universal rights.

Barack Obama, 16 November 2009

Living in a world of “isms”

Policymakers and academics live in a world of foreign policy “isms:” isolationism, unilateralism, bilateralism, imperialism and multilateralism are regarded as the menu from which states choose as they attempt to effect foreign relations. For the United States, while the options have varied, each choice has been conditioned by the assumption that it must act decisively and lead, even when collaborating with other states. According to realist scholars, hegemony implies dominance – expressed through a unilateral or imperialist foreign policy; for liberals who prefer a multilateralist approach, it entails leadership – albeit a “first among equals.”

These academic distinctions are then commonly translated into the language of policy debates. Politicians, aware of the popularity of (or at

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least the appearance of) a decisive foreign policy, and, conversely, ever fearful of appearing weak or indecisive, have reinforced the idea that the US must “act” to preempt threats to national security. Hard power must be brought to bear on potential opponents, with little patience for the time-consuming processes of negotiation and bargaining, let alone the idea that America might be better off avoiding a commitment to leadership altogether.

In this book, I argue that, in a world of emergent transnational threats, neither traditional academic formulations nor those employed by policy experts are always useful. We no longer live in a world where “isms” inevitably have the utility that they used to have. This is because that world was one exclusively dominated by state actors: where American dominance was predicated on unprecedented superiority, both economic and military; where the threat to security was geographically focused (the Soviet bloc); and where America’s closest allies were essentially forced to cooperate with America due to lack of an alternative. Even America’s enemies cooperated, in the sense that spheres of influence were implicitly established, treaties were signed (such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty) and limited amounts of goods, services, and even people were exchanged.

Accompanying this change, we have witnessed the emergence of new actors, notably nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which have emerged in large part as a result of the proposed shrinkage in government functions (if not in their actual size) advocated by the new public management philosophy of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The governance of stakeholders has replaced government by states. The importance of NGOs is often overstated by their proponents, notably academics who focus on the capacity of NGOs to “get issues on the policy agenda” rather than on the actual enforcement of new policy. Yet their emergence is significant because they do not coexist comfortably with the world of “isms,” the latter largely being predicated on the existence of a global system in which states monopolize deliberations, accords, and enforcement. Most importantly, in terms of the argument laid out in this book, NGOs intrude on that traditional structure because they increasingly legitimate policy demands. States, conversely, especially the most powerful states, have become increasingly legitimate as advocates of specific policies.

This decline in state legitimacy is partially the product of a self-inflicted wound, as politicians of a variety of political hues have demanded a smaller and more efficient government even as the actual size of those on the government payroll has expanded through the