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Q3(c)

Critically examine the decline of the United States of America as a hegemon and its implications for the changing international political order

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 2 · 15 marks · Changing International Political Order

Changing International Political Order: Rise of super powers; strategic and ideological Bipolarity, arms race and Cold War; Nuclear threat; Non-aligned movement; Collapse of the Soviet Union; Unipolarity and American hegemony; relevance of non-alignment in the contemporary world.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the decline of American hegemony and its implications
- Write at 15-mark length

Revision summary

Hegemony meant public goods, the dollar, and allied consent, as **Kindleberger** and **Ikenberry** framed it.

Wars, 2008, and China's rise mark relative decline.

Keohane asked whether regimes can outlast hegemony.

Implications are dual-order rivalry, thinner public goods, and hedging by middle powers.

The United States remains first in several capabilities; decline is not disappearance.

Introduction

American hegemony after 1945 combined military reach, the dollar, alliances, and a claim to liberal order. Decline is relative: others rose, wars drained prestige, and consent thinned. Implications are a messier hierarchy, not a neat Chinese succession.

Body

What hegemony was

- Charles **Kindleberger** treated a hegemon as the provider of public goods: open markets, liquidity, and last-resort stability.
- John **Ikenberry** described a liberal hegemonic order that bound the United States by rules its allies accepted.
- Robert **Keohane**'s *After Hegemony* already asked whether regimes could outlive the peak of US preponderance.

Signs of decline

- Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan damaged the military-political aura.
- 2008 exposed financial fragility. China's manufacturing and Belt and Road offered another centre.
- Allies hedged. The **unipolar moment** of the 1990s did not freeze.

- Domestic polarisation reduced the reliability of US commitments.

Implications

- Waltzian polarity moves toward bipolar US-China competition inside a still crowded rest.
- Institutions (IMF, World Bank, WTO) face gridlock and rival banks and trade clubs.
- Middle powers, including India, gain bargaining room and also face pressure to choose.
- Public goods - sea lanes, climate, pandemic response - risk under-provision if **Kindleberger's** logic holds.
- Nuclear and alliance umbrellas become more questioned, which can spur proliferation or minilateral insurance such as the Quad.

Limits of the decline thesis

- The United States still leads in many military and innovation indexes. Decline is not collapse.

Flow diagram

US hegemony -> Relative decline
Relative decline -> China rise
Relative decline -> Institutional gridlock
Relative decline -> Middle-power bargains
China rise -> Messier order
Institutional gridlock -> Messier order
Middle-power bargains -> Messier order

Conclusion

American hegemony has receded from its post-1945 and post-1991 peaks. Implications are contested order, US-China rivalry, and more room and risk for States such as India. **Keohane's** question remains: can rules survive a weaker hegemon, or does Waltzian balancing take over?

Facts & figures

Kindleberger

Hegemonic stability: a lead State supplies open markets and crisis liquidity.

Keohane

After Hegemony: international regimes may persist after the hegemon's peak.

Ikenberry

Liberal hegemonic order as rule-bound US leadership accepted by Western allies.

Unipolar moment

1990s vocabulary for unmatched US power after the Soviet collapse, now qualified by China's rise.

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