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Four Essays on the Global Engagement of the United States of America in the 21st Century

Ville Sinkkonen

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the position of the United States as the superpower *par excellence* has become increasingly tenuous. This state of affairs is often framed as a function of relative power shifts in the international system, domestic political and cultural travails as well as self-inflicted policy blunders, particularly in the Middle East. Yet, despite these apparent challenges, the United States remains, by most material indicators, the most powerful state in the world. Likewise, the US still possesses a broad global outlook, retains considerable agency in the international arena, and enjoys an extensive menu of policy options.

This dissertation starts from the premise that US foreign policy and international actorness in the unfolding 21st century, indeed the very trappings of America's international engagement, can still be analysed through the lens of *hegemony*. In other words, for the time being at least, the US can still be said to play a *hegemonic role* within the current international order. This role is replete with *both* the special privileges that have historically been assumed by and granted to materially powerful states with the requisite resources and willingness to lead, *as well as* the extraordinary responsibilities that befall upon such a leader to sustain international order.

While America's options and ability to shape the international arena in a manner it deems fit may be more restricted than in the recent past, at least in the short to medium term, the fate of American hegemony is *not* structurally predetermined by material historical forces. In fact, successful navigation of the treacherous currents of the international, in various regions, domains and issue areas, can lengthen the shadow of American hegemony or, at the very least, shape the international order that emerges after US ascendancy eventually wanes. The converse, of course, is true of failure, which would constitute the inability by the incumbent hegemon to select the "correct" policy course, or unwillingness to articulate and negotiate compelling normative visions of order fit for the changing times. It is the objective of the present study to bring to the fore, in a novel and innovative manner, precisely such difficulties of carrying out a hegemonic role. Specifically, the study pries into the

intricacies of *hegemonic failure* in the early 21st century. It explores *whether, in what sense, or to what extent the United States is indeed "failing hegemony", or can even be seen as being in the process of losing its hegemonic position altogether*.

To carry out this task, the present exposition makes a case for bringing the ideational and social foundations of hegemony to the fore without neglecting the notion's material basis and domestic-political foundations. The conceptual and theoretical discussion is thus built around an original tripartite framework consisting of the *material*, *intrinsic* and *socio-institutional* images of hegemony. This scaffold is complemented by four original publications that offer novel avenues for analysing the concept of hegemony, in general, and its American manifestation, in particular. Each of the studies endeavours to capture new insights, primarily regarding the *ideational* and *socio-institutional* aspects of the US's global role, and how these possibly contribute to hegemonic failure. The four essays thus mine: (i) the failed visions of order narrated by the American hegemon against the backdrop of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region; (ii) the hegemon's fraught attempts to manage a pivotal relationship with Egypt through the fostering of trust; (iii) the prospects of increased value divergence within the transatlantic space reflected in American and European articulations of freedom; and (iv) the potentially corrosive ideational contests that unfold within the American body politic over the US hegemonic role, with a particular focus on the promulgation of Donald Trump's foreign policy doctrine.

Ultimately the theoretical edifice and the original publications speak to the inherent difficulty that the US will inevitably face when it comes to exercising hegemony in an ever more complex world. These challenges are not merely a function of the perceived decline in America's relative material power or the manifold internal travails that possibly erode the United States' ability to project power. The prospect of failure also resides in, and may thus spring from, the realm of the social, the ideational, the institutional, and the relational. Hegemony is ultimately also about (domestic) policy ideas that inform a sense of hegemonic purpose; about articulating compelling hegemonic visions of order, embedding them in institutions, and striving to realise them through policy implementation; about managing at times fraught relationships with allies, friends, and even foes; and about the building and nurturing of a shared value base within the hegemonic core. These are insights that theorists of hegemony, not to mention practitioners of foreign policy, ignore at their peril.

KEYWORDS: hegemony, United States, International Relations, institutions, ideas, narratives, trust, freedom, international order, power

TURUN YLIOPISTO
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TIIVISTELMÄ

Yhdysvaltojen säilyminen kansainvälisen järjestelmän johtavana suurvaltana on näyttänyt viime vuosina entistä epävarmemmalta. Tähän tilanteeseen ovat johtaneet kiihtyvä suhteellinen valtasiirtymä kansainvälisessä järjestelmässä, kotimaisten poliittisten ja kulttuuristen jakolinjojen syveneminen sekä ulkopoliittiset virhelaskelmat erityisesti Lähi-idässä. Näistä haasteista huolimatta Yhdysvallat on edelleen järjestelmän voimakkain valtio useimpien materiaalisten mittareiden valossa. Lisäksi USA on edelleen globaali toimija kaikilla relevanteilla kansainvälisen politiikan aloilla ja alueilla. Maa omaa myös laajan ulko- ja turvallisuuspoliittisen keinopakin.

Tämän väitöskirjan lähtökohtana on, että Yhdysvaltojen ulkopolitiikkaa ja kansainvälistä toimijuutta 2000-luvulla voi edelleen lähestyä hegemonia-käsitteen kautta. Nykyhetkessä USA:lla on yhä hegemoninen rooli kansainvälisellä areenalla, mikä tarkoittaa paitsi erityisiä etuoikeuksia, joita suurvallat ovat perinteisesti nauttineet, myös painavaa vastuuta vallitsevan kansainvälisen järjestelmän ylläpitämiseksi.

Vaikka Yhdysvaltojen kyky muokata kansainvälistä järjestelmää mieleisekseen on aiempaa rajoitetumpi, lyhyellä tai keskipitkällä aikavälillä maan hegemonia-aseman heikkeneminen ei ole pelkästään rakenteellisten ajureiden ja historiallisten muutosvoimien ennalta määräämä lopputulema. Yhdysvallat voi pidentää hegemonisen asemansa kestoa omalla toiminnallaan, navigoimalla onnistuneesti kansainvälisen järjestelmän tyrskyissä ja tyvenissä. Yhtäältä onnistuneet (ulko)poliittiset ratkaisut eri alueiden, asiakysymysten ja kriisien suhteen antavat järjestelmän johtavalle valtiolle myös mahdollisuuden vaikuttaa siihen, millainen järjestelmä jää elämään Yhdysvaltojen ylivertaisen valta-aseman kadottua. Toisaalta epäonnistuminen eli kyvyttömyys tehdä oikeita poliittisia linjanvetoja ja ratkaisuja tai artikuloida houkuttelevia tulevaisuuden visioita kansainvälisen järjestelmän kehittämiseksi puolestaan nopeuttaisi maan johtajuusaseman rapautumista. Tämä väitöskirja nostaa esille niitä vaikeuksia, joita USA kohtaa pyrkiessään ylläpitämään hegemonia-asemaansa. Keskiössä ovat *hegemoniset epäonnistumiset*.

Tutkimuksessa esitellään uusia näkökulmia siihen, millä tavoin Yhdysvallat on epäonnistunut hegemonia-asemansa ylläpitämisessä, sekä pohditaan, onko USA todella menettämässä johtajuusasemansa 2000-luvun alun kansainvälisessä järjestelmässä.

Tätä tehtävää varten väitöskirjassa rakennetaan kolmiulotteinen teoriakehikko, jossa hegemoniaa tarkastellaan *materiaalisena*, *sisäsyntyisenä* ja *sosiaalis-institutionaalisena* ilmiönä. Kehikon tarkoituksena on tuoda analyysin keskiöön erityisesti hegemonian ideapohjaiset ja sosiaaliset rakennuspalikat, unohtamatta kuitenkaan valtaresurssien ja sisäpoliittisten tekijöiden merkitystä. Teoriaosiota täydentävät väitöskirjan neljä alkuperäisjulkaisua, joissa avataan näkökulmia sekä hegemoniakäsitteeseen että Yhdysvaltojen hegemonia-asemaan. Jokainen näistä osatutkimuksista tuo esille uuden avauksen USA:n globaalin roolin ideapohjaisista ja sosiaalis-institutionaalisista ulottuvuuksista ja siitä, miten nämä mahdollisesti linkittyvät hegemonisiin epäonnistumisiin. Alkuperäisjulkaisuissa tarkastellaan (i) Yhdysvaltojen epäonnistuneita alueellisen järjestelmän rakennusvisioita Lähi-idässä, (ii) USA:n hankaliksi osoittautuneita pyrkimyksiä rakentaa ja ylläpitää luottamukseen perustuvia suhteita Egyptin kanssa, (iii) transatlanttisen yhteisön arvopohjan rapautumismahdollisuuksia amerikkalaisten ja eurooppalaisten vapausdiskurssien pohjalta sekä (iv) niitä kamppailuja, joita Yhdysvaltojen sisällä käydään maan hegemoniaroolin tulevaisuudesta, keskittyen erityisesti Donald Trumpin presidenttikauteen.

Teoriaosio ja alkuperäisjulkaisut osoittavat, miten vaikeaa hegemonia-aseman ylläpitäminen on entistä kompleksisemmassa kansainvälisessä järjestelmässä. Nämä haasteet eivät kuitenkaan kumpua ainoastaan Yhdysvaltojen suhteellisen valta-aseman heikkenemisestä kansainvälisessä järjestelmässä tai sisäpoliittisesta kuohunnasta, joka vaikeuttaa maan kykyä projisoida voimaa kansainväliselle areenalle. Epäonnistuminen voi kummuta yhtä lailla ideoista, sosiaalisista suhteista ja instituutioiden laiminlyönnistä. Hegemoniassa on siis kyse myös poliittisista ideoista, jotka ohjaavat maata kohti kansainvälisen johtajuusaseman tavoittelua ja ylläpitämistä; houkuttelevista visioista, niiden sitomisesta instituutioihin ja pyrkimyksistä niiden toteuttamiseksi; vaikeidenkin suhteiden ylläpitämisestä liittolaisten, kumppaneiden, ja jopa vihollisten kanssa; sekä jaetun arvopohjan rakentamisesta ja vaalimisesta järjestelmän pysyvyyden kannalta tärkeimpien saman mielisten valtioiden kanssa. Hegemonian teoreetikkojen, ja miksei myös ulkopolitiikan tekijöiden, tulisi jatkossa tiedostaa nämä näkökohdat.

ASIASANAT: hegemonia, Yhdysvallat, kansainvälinen politiikka, instituutiot, ideat, narratiivit, luottamus, vapaus, kansainvälinen järjestelmä, valta

Acknowledgements

This dissertation has been in the works for quite a while. With all its twists and turns, the project has spanned an intellectual journey that began officially in the autumn of 2013, but, in reality, has been brewing at least since the publication of my first academic article in 2010. During that time, I have had the privilege of working with and meeting so many wonderful and talented people who, in one way or another, have contributed to the completion of this scholarly endeavour.

Firstly, I am forever grateful to my two PhD supervisors for their help and unwavering support. I want to thank professor Outi Korhonen for encouraging me to pursue new opportunities and think outside traditional academic disciplinary boundaries. Her support has broadened my intellectual horizons and made possible cherished visits to faraway places like Harvard and Doha, which have – I dare hope – enhanced my faculties for critical thinking and made me a better scholar. Professor Henri Vogt, my mentor, frequent co-author and friend, has played a pivotal role in the completion of this dissertation. His curiosity for all things social-scientific, philosophical and international, his enduring search for the perfect union of eloquence and lucidity in spoken and written form, and, above all, his genuine devotion to family, friends, colleagues and students are traits I have come to admire more and more as the years have passed – they are also things that I aspire to emulate each day, in my work and life in general.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the two pre-examiners of my dissertation, Professor Mikael Baaz from the University of Gothenburg – who also kindly accepted the invitation to act as my opponent for the public defence – and Professor Jennifer Leigh Bailey from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Your insightful engagement with my work proved extremely valuable as I applied the finishing touches to the dissertation.

The Faculty of Law at the University of Turku has been my academic home for some six years, the bulk of the dissertation writing process. I am eternally thankful for all the support – financial and otherwise – that I have received during that time. I would especially like to thank Professor Anne Kumpula, the Dean of the Faculty, and Assistant Professor Mika Viljanen, the Head of the Doctoral Programme, for continuing to have faith in my ability to see this project through, despite my decision

to work fulltime elsewhere for the last few years. The International Law team at the faculty also provided a much-needed source of collegial comfort when self-doubt crept in, as often tends to happen when embarking on a seemingly insurmountable research undertaking. Mikko Rajavuori, Johanna Friman, Jakob Haerting, Shorena Nikoleishvili and Toni Selkälä, I am grateful for all your help. Others at the faculty, particularly Anne Alvesalo-Kuusi, Heini Kainulainen, Tuomas Mylly, Janne Salminen, Jukka Snell and Jaakko Salminen, also provided important guidance and really made me feel at home. I am especially grateful to Ali Imran for his collegiality, friendship and for introducing me to new culinary delights. Of course, a dissertation project would never be completed without the requisite administrative support. Here Mirkka Ruotsalainen has been irreplaceable, answering queries big and small, while Tarja Linden has provided the crucial final organisational touches for a smooth public defence during exceptional times.

The long academic journey ultimately captured in these pages actually began in the confines of what was, back in the day, officially called the Department of Political Science at the University of Turku – I guess it still is in everyday parlance, at least for those of us who have been around long enough. I have had the privilege of being part of this community ever since I embarked on my undergraduate studies in 2008, even though life has ultimately taken me elsewhere. Without encouragement from my teachers, especially Juha Vuori, Rauli Mickelsson and Kaisa Herne, I never would have had the courage to pursue a career as a researcher. Other members of staff, too, particularly Maija Setälä, Antti Pajala, Mikael Mattlin and Matti Jutila, have provided much appreciated advice along the way. The research seminar at the department has been a safe haven, a place where even critical engagement with the work of colleagues was always sprinkled with just the right amount of humour and camaraderie. I am grateful to all the fellow travellers of the seminar, especially Leena Vastapuu, Marjaana Mäenpää, Saila Heinikoski, Annina Kärkkäinen, Sami Torssonen, Maija Jäske, Milla Vaha, Juha Ylisalo, Hannu Autto, Kimmo Makkonen, Mikko Leino and Teemu Rantanen. I have missed our lively discussions – may we have more in the future.

I joined the Center on US Politics and Power (CUSPP) and the Global Security Research Programme (SEC) at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) as a Research Fellow in January 2017. Coincidentally, this was twenty days before the presidential inauguration of one Donald J. Trump, and it has been an eventful, at times challenging, but nevertheless rewarding ride since. I want to thank the Director of the Institute Mika Aaltola and SEC Programme Director Mikael Wigell for their full support during the thesis finalisation process. This has given me the needed time and energy to tie together the few remaining loose ends and complete this work. I am also grateful to former Director Teija Tiilikainen for all her help, encouragement and advice along the way. CUSPP Project Director Bart Gaens has been my FIIA

sensei from the start, always ready to listen and lend a hand – you are a wonderful boss, mentor, colleague and friend. I am also indebted to the other current and former "CUSPPians", Juha Käpylä, Charly Salonius-Pasternak, Niklas Helwig, Marie-Louise Hindsberg, Anu Ruokamo, Anna Kronlund and Anna Wikholm, as well as our visiting senior fellows Mark Katz, Leo Michel, Christopher Kojm, Deborah McCarthy and Carla Norrlöf. We have had many an interesting conversation about the deep undercurrents and surface level maelstroms of American politics and US foreign policy. Some of the seeds planted during these discussions have certainly grown into full-blown ideas that appear on the pages of this thesis.

Beyond the scope of CUSPP, my SEC colleagues, particularly Jyrki Kallio, Harri Mikkola, Olli Ruohomäki, Elina Sinkkonen and Antto Vihma, have been a vital support system for navigating a complex world and the at times hectic day-to-day goings on of a research institute. Katja Creutz deserves a special mention here. She is not only a brilliant international lawyer, but also a wonderful colleague, fellow conference goer and friend, always ready to share her wisdom – also on matters beyond the workplace. Projects at FIIA have also crossed programme boundaries, and these endeavours have pushed me to explore research avenues beyond my previous comfort zone. I would like to thank Juha Jokela, Wolfgang Mühlberger and Toni Alaranta for inviting me to take part in these intriguing research escapades. Of course, none of these projects would ever come to fruition without the administrative staff and the Research and Communications Team at FIIA, my thanks go out to each and every one of you, especially Mathilda Salo, Kukka-Maria Kovsky, Maija Salonen and Kaarina Vainio. Finally, the list would not be complete without Matti Pesu, a FIIA colleague and also a member of the famed "Haaga Sushi Seminar" – Matti, thank you for your always insightful banter, co-authorship and friendship.

There is, of course, life beyond the confines of the University of Turku and FIIA. On the academic side, Tuomas Forsberg, Johanna Vuorelma and Hiski Haukkala have played key roles in projects that have led to the completion of significant parts of this dissertation. Their comments and reflections have been invaluable and are much appreciated. With Anne Nykänen, the third member of the "Haaga Sushi Seminar", we shared many an engaging discussion on theoretical and conceptual matters during the early stages of the thesis writing process. Then there is the lighter touch on a serious matter, the "Trump Sauna" crew, namely Antti Ronkainen and Sakari Sirkkanen. Our semi-regular broadcasts on Yle Puhe, Finnish public radio, have been a joy to record and also a way to bounce around ideas, some of which have, in refined form, found their way onto the following pages.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my nearest and dearest friends. Toni Ruokonen is not only a fellow member of a stellar Political Science master's thesis seminar at the University of Turku, but also appreciates the importance of a good ice hockey or football game, the optimal beverage for the occasion, and good

conversation. Over the years, enjoyable rounds of golf with Perttu Kröger have remained a welcome distraction from the travails and tribulations of academic research. Taneli Mäkinen has always been there to provide advice and a helping hand. He has also shown it is possible to reach great academic and professional heights from a small town in Eastern Finland – your example is an inspiration.

Last but certainly not least, I could never have completed this project without the love and support of my family. My grandparents, only one of whom is still with us today, have, each in their own way, given life lessons that have allowed me to believe in myself and persevere – Vilho and Lempi, Onni and Lea, *kiitos kaikesta*. My parents Marjukka and Kari have always been there to love and support me, through good times and bad. They have given me and my brother the tools and encouragement necessary to pursue life's goals, big and small. I can't begin to express how lucky I have been to have such a loving and caring family. Finally, and most important of all, Larissa you are the love of my life, you are my rock, and I am forever yours. Thank you for everything, without you, none of this would have been possible. Eliel, you are a miracle, every day I get to spend with you is the greatest gift a father could ever hope for.

Ville Sinkkonen
15 November 2020
Helsinki, Finland

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Figures

List of Original Publications

This dissertation is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

I Sinkkonen, Ville. 2020. "American Narratives of Order-Building in the Middle East: Dashed Visions on the Nile." In *Political Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa: Conceptions of Order and Perceptions of Instability*, edited by Wolfgang Mühlberger and Toni Alaranta, 139–162. Cham: Springer.

II Sinkkonen, Ville. 2018. "Understanding the Trust–Distrust Nexus between the United States and Egypt." In *Trust in International Relations: Rationalist, Constructivist, and Psychological Approaches*, edited by Hiski Haukkala, Carina van de Wetering and Johanna Vuorelma, 9–36, Abingdon: Routledge.

III Sinkkonen, Ville and Henri Vogt. 2019. "Connected in Freedom? Reconstructing a Foundational Value in EU and US Foreign Policy Discourses." *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 17 (3): 341–369.

IV Sinkkonen, Ville. 2018. "Contextualizing the 'Trump Doctrine': Realism, Transactionalism and the Civilizational Agenda." *FIIA Analysis*, no. 10. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

Preface

This academic project has been long in the making. I began writing my dissertation in earnest in late 2013, with the (in hindsight) rosy-eyed aspiration of finishing it in the span of less than four years. Life and different academic and professional exploits intervened and now – almost eight years on – I notice that the journey has been fascinating and this work has taken on a somewhat different form than I initially envisaged. However, the purpose of this small preface is not to recount all those rewarding meandering paths that culminated in putting hands to keyboard and completing this scholarly work – quite the contrary, in fact. This short note is wholly instrumental, its objective is to explain to the reader my thinking when it comes to the structure and shape that this dissertation has taken.

The work that has ultimately emerged is a compendium of two academic articles and two book chapters preceded by a rather lengthy theoretical discussion. Each of the original publications were written for different academic fora and projects. The first of them is a book chapter entitled "American Narratives of Order-Building in the Middle East: Dashed Visions on the Nile". It was completed under the auspices of a project at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), which culminated in early 2020 in a volume edited by Wolfgang Mühlberger and Toni Alaranta entitled *Political Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa: Conceptions of Order and Perceptions of Instability*. The second one, "Understanding the Trust–Distrust Nexus between the United States and Egypt", is also a book chapter, part of an edited volume *Trust in International Relations: Rationalist, Constructivist and Psychological Approaches* by Hiski Haukkala, Carina van de Wetering and Johanna Vuorelma, published in 2018. The chapter, and the book proposal it was included in, began to take shape at a series of panels at the 2016 International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Convention in Atlanta. The third original publication is an article called "Connected in freedom? Reconstructing a Foundational Value in EU and US Foreign Policy Discourses", a co-authored work with Henri Vogt, published in the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* in the autumn of 2019. This article, too, was initially written for a panel presentation, this time at the 2018 ISA Convention in San Francisco. The fourth and final essay "Contextualizing the 'Trump Doctrine': Realism, Transactionalism and the Civilizational Agenda" is an article published in

the peer-reviewed *FIIA Analysis* series of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs in late 2018. It is part of a burgeoning set of papers, chapters and presentations by the present author contemplating the implications of the Trump presidency for America's evolving global engagement.

By design, my contributions to these various projects have had considerable conceptual and temporal overlap. In light of this, the theoretical exposition of the present dissertation serves a threefold purpose. The first is an ambitious one. The objective is to construct an original tripartite framework for picking apart the concept of hegemony; the aim is to make a theoretical contribution to enhance understanding of the various facets of the study's titular concept. In this sense, the theory section can be treated as a free-standing contribution to a burgeoning academic debate on (American) hegemony. Secondly, the lengthy conceptual discussion endeavours to make visible the oftentimes unwritten theoretical presuppositions that undergird the four original publications. It has not always been possible to include extensive theory-laden sections and conceptual dissection within these studies, at least not to the extent I would have preferred. This, of course, is due to the reasonable limitations on length and form that publishers, editors and reviewers habitually place upon one's scholarly undertakings. Thirdly, and relatedly, the theoretical framework seeks to tie together the original publications under a common rubric, to persuade the reader to treat them as part of an organic whole.

In writing the four original publications, I have naturally sought to contribute to the relevant scholarly discussions and enhance understanding of the facets of US foreign policy and international engagement that each of the studies addresses. The chapters and articles, too, may thus be read as singular contributions or – I dare hope – as a body of work that illuminates a small but important portion of America's encounter with the world in the 21st century.

Ville Sinkkonen
24 September 2020
Helsinki, Finland

1 Introduction

> We're no longer the singular dominant power that we were just after the Cold War, but we're still the pivotal player. We still have lots of assets: the world's best military; an economy that is bigger and more innovative than anyone else's, even though it is plagued by inequalities; and a capacity for alliances and coalition building unmatched by our rivals. We still have a window of American pre-eminence before us, in which we can help shape international order to safeguard our interests and values, before others shape it for us. (Burns 2019)

The above quote by William J. Burns, one of the leading lights of American diplomats in the post-Cold War era, has more than a mere smidgeon of truth to it. The United States remains, by most indicators, the most powerful state in the world. This means that, arguably, the trappings of America's international engagement can still be fathomed through the lens of *hegemony*. That is to say, the US can still be said to play a *hegemonic role* within the current international *order*, at least for the time being. Such a role brings with it *both* the special privileges that have historically been assumed by and also granted to materially powerful states with the requisite resources and willingness to lead, *as well as* the extraordinary responsibilities that befall upon such a leader to sustain international order. And yet, accepting the premise that hegemony remains a useful concept does not imply ignorance when it comes to recent developments in the international arena, not to mention those bedevilling American domestic politics. As Burns acknowledges above, it is evident that the US is currently finding it ever more difficult to play the part of the hegemon; its hegemonic position has become increasingly tenuous.

America's ascendancy is currently being challenged from manifold directions. Power is said to be transitioning horizontally from the US and its Western allies and partners to rising powers, most notably China. After a lull of roughly two decades, Russia is flexing its muscles, gaining influence in its near abroad, and acting as a potential spoiler globally. At the same time, on the heels of globalisation and technological change, power is diffusing vertically to non-state actors ranging from terrorist organisations and criminal networks to cross-border political movements,

third-sector actors, enterprises and even influential individuals. Both of these macro-level trends have, arguably, been strengthened by the global financial crisis of 2007/8, not to mention America's well-documented foreign policy misadventures in the Middle East in the first decade of the 21st century. Such blunders illustrate how the hegemon's room for manoeuvre is further circumscribed by the fact that all its actions face near instantaneous scrutiny, both domestically and globally. The US is constantly judged by its allies, partners, rivals and enemies as well as the publics of these disparate states, not to mention by the manifold actors that populate the transnational spaces between and beyond the state. Through their conduct, all these actors can make playing a hegemonic role more (or less) difficult for the United States.

A further challenge emanates from the American domestic scene. A potent brew of a public weary of foreign interventions, profound dislocation caused by a globalising economy, and an ever more polarised body politic, has opened new avenues for demagoguery, the politics of nationalism and unilateralist ideas. All these factors seem to converge in the peculiar rise of Donald Trump to the presidency. The times are thus reflected in the on-going contest over America's "being" in the world. Historically, American leaders and the public alike have harboured strong convictions regarding the exceptional nature of their own nation. Many a policymaker and intellectual has spoken at length of America's indispensability for the sustainability of international order writ large, but such ideas are offset by the allure of aloofness – in part a function of the nation's fortuitous geographical position, oceans removed from the Eurasian landmass. Both traditions can be tapped into by political entrepreneurs, and Trump's ascendancy has clearly re-energised the ideational contests over how the US should interpret and exercise its own exceptionality.

And still, despite all these trials and tribulations, it is evident that the US continues to have a broad global horizon, one that is broader than for any other state in the current historical context. In keeping with this global gaze, the hegemon, or more aptly its political leadership, retains considerable *agency* and a broad menu of *policy options*. While these options may be more restricted than in the recent past, as a result of mistakes and unfolding global and domestic developments, it does appear that – at least in the short to medium term – the fate of American hegemony is *not* structurally predetermined by faceless material historical forces. To put it differently, it can be expected that *successful* navigation of the treacherous waters of the international (in various regions, domains and issue areas) can lengthen the shadow of American hegemony or, at the very least, shape the parameters of the kind of international order that emerges after US ascendancy eventually wanes. The converse, of course, is true of *failure*, which would constitute the inability by the incumbent hegemon to select the "correct" policy course, or unwillingness to

articulate and negotiate compelling normative visions of order fit for the changing times. The bottom line is that playing a hegemonic role in an ever more complex international environment remains a herculean task. It is the objective of the present study to bring to the fore, in a novel and innovative manner, precisely such difficulties of being a hegemon and cultivating a hegemonic order. In short, the study pries into the intricacies of *hegemonic failure*.

To carry out this task, an original conceptual and theoretical framework consisting of the *material*, *intrinsic* and *socio-institutional* images of hegemony will be constructed. These three dimensions reflect the capabilities-grounded, domestic-political, as well as institutions-, legitimacy- and relations-based understandings of the study's titular concept, as found in the relevant literature and debates. This theoretical edifice is then complemented by four original publications (two book chapters and two articles) that offer novel avenues for analysing the concept of *hegemony*, in general, and its *American manifestation*, in particular, in an early 21st-century context. The aim of the theoretical discussion and the essays that follow is to add to our understanding of *whether, in what sense, or to what extent the United States is indeed, as the title suggests, "failing hegemony", or can even be seen as being in the process of losing its hegemonic position altogether*.

While the study duly acknowledges the material basis of hegemony and hegemonic ordering (both internationally and domestically), each of the four constituent analyses endeavours to capture insights predominantly regarding the socio-institutional and ideational aspects of US's global role. The present work does not, for instance, provide in-depth quantitative analyses of military and economic power capabilities or demographic trends to ascertain the presence of American hegemony. In fact, while such materialist expositions are plentiful in the extant International Relations (IR) literature, the debate on what the implications are for the existence, development or waning of US hegemony remains utterly inconclusive. The current study, in contrast, provides four snapshots – they could even be thought of as four different but interrelated stories – on the visionary and institutional, socio-relational, values-based and ideationally-contested nature of America's hegemonic role in the 21st century. The four essays deal, respectively, with (i) *the visions of order* propagated by the American hegemon against the backdrop of turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, (ii) the hegemon's attempts to *manage a pivotal relationship* with Egypt through fostering of trust, (iii) shared and diverging *articulations of a key value*, freedom, within the transatlantic "hegemonic core", and (iv) *ideational contests* that unfold within the American body politic over the US hegemonic role, with a particular focus on the evolution of foreign policy "doctrine" in the Trump era.

Hegemony, a concept that has come to have both material and socio-discursive connotations in scholarly discussions, thus serves as an overarching frame in the

present study for making sense of US foreign policy and international actorness in the unfolding 21st century. In fact, as will become clear in due course, both political leaders' and academic analysts' understandings of the US as an international actor *par excellence* warrant putting the concept of hegemony front and centre when it comes to disentangling the past, present and future of America's global engagement. This preoccupation, even fascination, with hegemony and its manifestations is a shared premise that undergirds the forthcoming theoretical discussion and all four original publications.

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The exposition unfolds as follows. ***Chapter 2*** presents a short synoptic history of America's peculiar global engagement, focusing on the ideas that have informed the US encounter with the globe. It starts with a core notion of America's self-conception as a nation, namely *American exceptionalism*. This belief in the difference and superiority of the American experiment and experience is part and parcel of the politico-cultural frameworks that undergird US foreign policy. Exceptionalism is thus deemed constitutive of America's identity as an international actor. However, it is also a broad concept that means different things for different people. Throughout its history American exceptionalism has arguably pulled US global engagement in two directions. On the one hand, exceptionalism has entailed setting an example, remaining a proverbial "city on a hill" aloof from the world and especially the power-political wrangling of the "old world". On the other hand, exceptionalism has been interpreted as a call to spread American values and ideas around the globe. In both traditions, exceptionalism forms an "identitarian baseline" for studying and understanding the peculiarities of US hegemony, *i.e.* what sets the *United States* apart from other such actors in world history.

The discussion on exceptionalism is followed by a short review of America's "coming of age" as a superpower in the 20th century. This exposition runs from the visions of a new world order after World War I, followed by America's turn inward for the interwar period, on to the formative moment of hegemonic order-building in the aftermath of the allied victory in the Second World War – a triumph which left the US a class apart from other great powers in terms of power capabilities. A dual logic thus came to govern US global engagement in the Cold War era.

On the level of great-power relations, the power-political and ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union created a "containment order", replete with both a unique approach for checking the pursuits of the adversary and a novel foreign and security policy vocabulary. Within America's own sphere of influence, in contrast, a "liberal international order" took shape under American stewardship. This order had institutional, normative, economic and security

foundations, working in tandem to embed an edifice that was deemed beneficial not only for the US but also its elaborate network of allies and partners. The order was a "grand bargain", it effectively bound the power of the hegemon to the service of a greater whole, whilst allowing the US to "cast" its outsized influence into the future. To a large but bearable extent, the order reflected the preferences and values of the hegemon. At the same time, however, US relations with states in the periphery were marked by a far less benign approach of co-opting elites in client states to pursue policies that served America's interests, often in ways that appeared unsavoury from a values-based standpoint.

After these reflections, a brief account of the post-Cold War era maps out the recent history of US global engagement, from the "unipolar moment" that followed America's triumph in the Cold War, through a hyperactive phase in US foreign policy in the aftermath of 9/11, up to the present. In particular, it is stressed that the current "crisis" of the post-Cold War order – and by implication of American hegemony as a vital feature of that order – is a perfect storm of sorts. Here (i) horizontal dynamics of power transition from the West to the "rest", (ii) a diffusion of power vertically to actors below and beyond the state in a shrinking globalised world, and (iii) the challenge emanating from subversive forces within established democracies collide to render the future of US hegemony – or at the very least the shape it will assume in the years to come – uncertain.

Chapter 3 contains the brunt of the theoretical discussion of the dissertation. It is built around an original framework of three "images" of hegemony: *material*, *intrinsic* and *socio-institutional*. This original tripartite categorisation is drawn from the extant debates on the concept in International Relations and other disciplines, including International Law and Political Science proper. It serves as a heuristic device, as a means to illuminate different dimensions of the study's titular concept.

The discussion starts from the *material* underpinnings of hegemony, which should form the baseline for any intellectual endeavour into the concept. From this predominant standpoint, a hegemon is an actor that holds a preponderant power position in what is essentially a unipolar international system. This preponderance is defined by asymmetries in material endowments – the so-called "elements of national power" including military and economic capabilities as well as other indicators like population size, geography, natural resources and technological capacity. The hegemon draws upon these power capabilities to control the international system or, in the case of regional hegemony, some subset of the system.

While theorists subscribing to this understanding of hegemony differ over its longevity and geographical breadth, they share a chiefly capabilities-based understanding of the concept. However, this approach to hegemony leaves much to be desired in terms of two core conundrums. First, what (if anything) beyond a desire for power, security or survival drives hegemons to seek and maintain a position of

preponderance? Second, what are the other drivers, beyond the (often) latent threat of being forced by the hegemon to submit that drive other states to follow the hegemon's lead? In short, the structural realist accounts at the root of the material image paper over the fact that power is about *both* the possession of capabilities and bringing those capabilities to bear in relationships with other actors in the international arena.

To get to the bottom of these questions, it is firstly important to appreciate the *intrinsic* unit-level attributes that drive the hegemon to pursue hegemony in the first place. Such accounts crack open the "black box" of the state in order to arrive at a more holistic understanding of hegemony. A hegemonic state, then, is defined not only by its material preponderance but also by *will* and *ambition* – attributes that can only be understood with reference to domestic drivers. Hegemonic pursuits are conditioned by various factors internal to the state, its sources of "usable power". Such aspects include the capacities of agents in positions of leadership (think of the outsized role of presidents in the making of US foreign policy), the functioning of political institutions, public opinion and, crucially for present purposes, ideational and cultural factors.

Here it is argued that ideas regarding hegemony reside on three relevant analytical levels in the domestic political arena: the leadership, the policy elites – replete with the bureaucracies and organisations, formal and informal, within which they function – and the broader public sphere. However, these levels are not silos. Foreign policy leaders should instead be viewed as *embedded actors* with a relationship to both elite policy networks and broader society. Ideas regarding global engagement of the country do not appear into the minds of policymakers out of thin air.

Moreover, intrinsic accounts acknowledge that a hegemon's preponderant power position might actually amplify the causal importance of domestic-level factors as determinants of a hegemon's conduct on the international stage. A disproportionately powerful state need not be constantly worried about maintaining its security or, worse yet, ensuring its survival. Great power enables a broader realm of choices and less constraints. A hegemon has greater leeway to pursue policies that are grounded on ideational designs as opposed to predefined material interests. Ideational contestation over what kind of an international actor the US should be (identity) and what goals it should then pursue in the international arena (interests) thus play a vital role in determining how America engages with the world. Many intrinsic accounts, however, still leave the discussion at the halfway house. The imperatives flowing from the level of international structure are often viewed in predominantly materialist terms and relevant ideational factors are seen to emanate mostly from the domestic arena.

This is where the third *socio-institutional* image of hegemony comes in. A social account of the international arena appreciates that key characteristics of international actors can only be understood in relation to other international actors – *i.e.* a hegemon begets followers and *vice versa*. Moreover, these attributes are filled with meaning intersubjectively, through social interactions within social structures, which are, in turn, constituted by shared ideas. The world we see is mediated by collectively-held (even contested?) ideas, and only comes to possess meaning through ideas. This means that power attributes of states, as well as their interests and identities, only become relevant within such a social setting.

The central acknowledgement of the socio-institutional approaches to hegemony is that the power of the hegemon is embedded within a *hegemonic order*, which should be understood as a *social structure*. Such an order is, to an extent at least, purposefully constructed to serve more or less clearly defined ends. At minimum, the order fosters a modicum of stability in relations between the actors that constitute the order. In more robust incarnations, as in the case of the US-led liberal hegemonic order, it also consists of a range of values, norms, rules, institutions and practices that participants of the order adhere to.

Socio-institutional accounts of hegemony also direct attention to *consensual rule*. Such rule is achieved by institutionalising – and thereby legitimising – hegemonic power. Thus understood, a hegemonic order is a two-sided bargain. On the one hand, it grants a position of authority to its custodian, and, on the other, it binds the hegemon into a broadly accepted normative framework. To sustain its custodianship of the order, the hegemon therefore makes concessions to its followers by providing certain order-maintaining services or "public goods". This makes its exorbitant power bearable for others. The leading state, in this understanding, is fathomed to have not only special privileges by virtue of its position, but also special responsibilities for ensuring the sustainability of the order.

The operative term in social accounts of hegemony is therefore *legitimacy*, which the follower states grant to the hegemon and/or to the hegemonic order in general. The legitimacy of the hegemon is intimately linked to the core norms of the order, and turns on the extent to which the hegemon's conduct, interests and identity are in line with said norms. The sustainability of the order, again, is contingent upon the willingness of the hegemon to abide – to a sufficient extent – with the said norms. Hegemony is no longer a function of power capabilities, system polarity or intrinsic will and purpose; it is a normatively-grounded authoritative and legitimate status.

A socio-institutional account of hegemonic order also connotes *dynamism*. A hegemonic order is not etched in stone. It is a dynamic constellation of actors, institutions, norms, values and practices. The constitutive normative features of the order are therefore open to contestation by participants of the order, whether these be the hegemon itself or other states. As orders evolve, so do the standards of

legitimacy which define upstanding conduct by the hegemon and others. This means that the hegemon, as the leading state in the order, is forced to engage in an incessant process wherein it seeks to (re)legitimise both its leadership within the order as well as the normative makeup of the order writ large.

The socio-institutional image of hegemony also entails a broader, multifaceted understanding of power than that espoused in either the material or intrinsic images. In short, the hegemon's power should not merely be understood in terms of capabilities, the possibility of coercion or "usable power", but also as embedded into institutional fora, pervasive structural positions (*e.g.* leader/follower) and ubiquitous hegemonic discourses. Moreover, the centrality of hegemonic legitimacy underlines the need for the hegemon to consider the views of others when it uses power in the international arena. In particular, socio-institutional accounts emphasise that the hegemon should exercise power *with* others in the auspices of multilateral institutions and also harness co-optive "soft power" tools, which are feasibly easier for other states to stomach than the use of economic inducements, not to mention military coercion.

Alongside appreciating the role of institutions and legitimacy, the socio-institutional image opens avenues for appreciating the role that is played by other actors – the hegemon's followers and also potential challengers. A key insight of recent scholarship on hegemonic order is that it has both an *architecture* and an *infrastructure*. Architecture consists of the web of rules, norms and values that undergird the order. The infrastructure, in turn, includes the various relationships and interactions that take place between the different constituent parts of the order on different levels of abstraction, whether these be individual leaders, state bureaucracies or states as essentialised entities. Straddling these two are various *institutional arrangements* that *both* embody the normative architectural foundations of the order *and* present fora wherein different encounters between actors, encounters constitutive of the order's infrastructure, unfold.[1]

When it comes to the hegemon, its interactions with other states in the order are not only manifold, but also qualitatively different. Some are marked by indifference, others assume the form of "special relationships", while yet others may even entail the hegemon impinging on the sovereignty of client states. Asymmetries in material endowments may have some bearing upon these relationships, but such disparities do not predetermine their definitional features. Nor does the hegemon's material preponderance automatically mean that other states are hapless bystanders in the hegemonic order; they do have agency.

[1] The seminal contributions laying out the architecture/infrastructure distinction are Ikenberry and Nexon (2019) and Cooley and Nexon (2020).

The socio-institutional image of hegemony thus allows us to appreciate the plethora of different strategies available for other states to deal with the hegemon, and these strategies straddle a continuum from accommodational to oppositional. The fact that other states have (some) room for manoeuvre in their interactions with the hegemon means that the leading state is required to nurture and manage its relationships, and it is forced to do so through means beyond material inducement. In this context, the study introduces the concept of *trust* to both make sense of qualitative differences in a hegemon's relationships and to allow for a multi-level and socially aware analysis of dyadic interactions between a hegemon and another state. Trust should be interpreted as one key component of the interactions that underwrite hegemonic orders.

Moreover, the socio-institutional and intrinsic images of hegemony intertwine. Hegemonic orders, including the American-led one, tend to replicate the socio-economic, cultural and commercial logics of the hegemon on the international level. This means that the normative make-up of hegemonic order varies through history as the fortunes of hegemons wax and wane, with implications for how the architectural and infrastructural attributes of the order develop. Hegemonic orders thus exhibit hybridity, they are never perfectly based on consent, nor unequivocally grounded on coercion. This is also true of American hegemony. It exhibits quasi-imperial attributes, especially in the periphery, and quite consensual characteristics in the Western core, for instance. In this vein, American "liberal hegemony", while exhibiting key features of a constitutional, rules-based order, also consists of patron-client relationships. These are by their very nature less rule-governed and – normatively speaking – more exploitative than relations in and near the hegemonic core.

The discussion on the socio-institutional image is followed by a short *exposé* on *what might constitute hegemonic failure* in light of the three images of hegemony – this section thus ties together the insights of the three-image framework. In short, the material image provides little space for assessing hegemonic failure *per se*. It ties dynamism in the international system to the automatic, almost lawlike rise and decline in a hegemon's fortunes. Changes in relative power capabilities of a hegemon *vis-à-vis* a hegemonic challenger determines the fate of the hegemon and the hegemonic order. Against the current backdrop of the rise of China (and the "rest") and the falling fortunes of the US (and the West), a shift appears preordained. Some years down the line, the US will lose its hegemony (if it has not already done so) and this is not a result of failure on the part of the hegemon, it is symptomatic of the ironclad laws of hegemonic transition.

The intrinsic image, in contrast, provides space for assessing hegemonic failure in a dual sense. On the one hand, the debates on US foreign policy – insofar as they are constitutive of the domestic ideational foundations of hegemony – are themselves

concerned with hegemonic failure, as either a function of overambition or lack of will. On the other hand, *it is precisely the irreconcilability of current debates over US global engagement that can breed failure* when policymakers draw on their prescriptions to craft a policy course. In a climate of ideological polarisation, the hegemon may struggle to choose a policy course in the first place, or opt for courses of action that end up being corrosive of its position as a leader of the order and detrimental to that order in general. These dynamics are explored further in Original Publication IV of the present exposition.

The socio-institutional image provides a more multifarious picture of what potentially constitutes hegemonic failure. On a "macro level", failure may entail, on the one hand, the inability to renegotiate the terms of the current hegemonic order in the face of the presently unfolding crisis in the order's foundations, and demand for such refashioning on the part of new (materially) increasingly powerful stakeholders. On the other hand, it would also be tantamount to failure if the incumbent hegemon, unable to save the order it helped midwife, instead allows the international system to descend into chaos and lawlessness. Both of these descriptions point to the need for managed changes in the normative constitution of the order in the face of shifting material foundations, *i.e.* the rise of a potential hegemonic challenger, or a group of challengers.

However, given the complexity of the hegemonic order, failures may occur in a more piecemeal fashion, for instance, within one regional subset of the order or in particular relationships a hegemon has with follower states. It is here that the study makes its *three contributions to assessing hegemonic failure in the ideational domain* (Original Publications I, II, and III) by focusing on failure of *hegemonic vision*, difficulties in *relationship management*, and *potential value divergence* within the hegemonic core.

Chapter 4 thus contextualises the four original publications into the broader framework of the thesis. *Original Publication I* explores a key aspect of American hegemony, namely the order-building that the hegemon engages in, not by pursuing policies *per se*, but by narrating visions of order. Such order-building narratives are constructed to legitimise a particular manifestation of hegemonic order. They speak mostly to the architectural foundations and institutions of the hegemonic order, but also subsume the constituent relationships that make up the order's infrastructural foundations.

The publication illustrates how, in the post-9/11 era up until the advent of the Trump presidency, America's order-building narratives *vis-à-vis* the Middle East in general and Egypt – a "lynchpin" follower state in a peripheral region – in particular, were constructed on a "thick" understanding of liberal hegemony. In other words, both the Bush and Obama administrations argued that a stable and sustainable order in the region at large and in Egypt internally could only be constructed on the

foundation of freer, more democratic societies that provide opportunities for their populaces. However, for both administrations, the complexity of regional and domestic developments ultimately dashed their robust visions for order. The US remained a hypocritical hegemon, whose stories of order were too far removed from reality and, more troubling still, informed America's policies only half-heartedly and haphazardly. The order-building narratives of the US were often profoundly at odds with order-building practices. At the same time, a better-functioning order in the Middle East, one with a robust normative architecture and dense infrastructure embedded in functioning institutions, has remained illusory. The hegemon has, throughout the post 9/11 era, failed to narrate a compelling ordering vision for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The Trump administration, in contrast, has embarked on a policy devoid of liberal overtones *vis-à-vis* the Middle East and Egypt. In this interpretation, cosying up to local strongmen (notably Egypt's president Abdelfattah Al-Sisi), stressing the battle against terrorism and regional adversaries, as well as maintaining the flow of energy to international markets have subsumed talk of domestic reforms in the region. In this manner, President Trump has placed America's vision of order and the policies for maintaining order on an equal footing – they are blatantly self-serving, catering to a very narrow reading of the hegemon's national interest. In terms of strategic expediency and normative desirability this might prove problematic: a bet on authoritarian stability – an illiberal brand of hegemony – may prove a short-term bandage that cannot block a descent into disorder in the future.

Original Publication II complements the first by exploring further the infrastructural underpinnings of the US-Egypt relationship. The book chapter approaches this vital dyad from the standpoint of *trust*, a concept that has gained more traction in the study of interstate relationships in recent years, but has not been extensively explored in the context of hegemony studies.

After the conceptual exercise laying out the rationalist, psychological and (social) constructivist interpretations of trust, the publication problematises the predominant tendencies of IR studies to either anthropomorphise the state or focus on pivotal trusting relationships between individuals. Instead, the book chapter proposes an analytical framework based on three *levels of trust*: elite-level interpersonal relations, institutionalised inter-organisational ties, and trust between societies (manifest as collective beliefs).

The original publication then explores how trust functioned on these three different levels of analysis in the US-Egypt relationship during the heady days of the January 25th, 2011 Revolution. The analysis speaks to the limits inherent in building trusting interstate relationships on the elite and organisational levels: the upheaval in Egypt – marked by the Obama administration's decision to abandon Hosni Mubarak – strained the bonds built over decades between American leaders and Egyptian

elites. Meanwhile, any trust between the two states that had been created prior to the revolution on the interpersonal and inter-organisational levels – especially through military-to-military cooperation – had not seeped onto the societal level. Instead, reified identity- and emotions-based distrust towards the United States pervades Egyptian society, and a key source of that pervasive distrust is America's active complicity in sustaining both a domestic regime and regional order that a substantial number of Egyptians regard as illegitimate.

The arrangement the US had reached with Egyptian rulers over the span of more than thirty years, marked by co-opting the elites with little regard for the societal ills in Egypt, thus proved a disastrous recipe for ensuring long-term stability in the country and the region at large. America's hegemonic bargain with Egypt has thus remained inherently "thin" in terms of hegemonic infrastructure (interactions), architecture (values and norms) and institutional forms. This has contributed to a situation where the US' ability to influence the future trajectory of Egypt and the region at large has decreased. The chapter thus underlines the intractable dilemmas the US faces, and the tightrope it is forced to walk in trying to avoid hegemonic failure, when managing its (trusting) relationship with an authoritarian lynchpin state in a key region.

O*riginal Publication III*, co-authored with Henri Vogt, considers the hegemon's values – a core component of the architecture of a hegemonic order – in a comparative perspective *vis-à-vis* a key partner, namely the European Union.[2] The article takes stock of how the US and the EU articulate freedom, a value that has been foundational in justifying US aspiration for and exercise of its hegemonic role in the post-Second World War era. Freedom is not only a foundational value of the American political experiment, most prominently laid out in the First Amendment to the US Constitution – it is also intimately connected to America's national identity, to the "exceptional" role of the United States as an international actor. Moreover, and particularly relevant for current purposes, freedom has also constituted the transatlantic community of values, as well as the liberal international order that was until the end of the Cold War synonymous with the proverbial West before spreading outwards. Given that the US-led hegemonic order has been most robust within its transatlantic "core", in terms of architecture, infrastructure and their grounding in requisite institutions, it is particularly pertinent to inquire to what extent articulations of core values, in this case freedom, are diverging in the hegemonic centre.

To carry out the comparative analysis, two tripartite categorisations of freedom are introduced. The first encompasses a conceptual space associated with Isaiah

[2] Perhaps the EU is rather a *sui generis* entity, which is representative of a collection of US allies and partners, but in the present context this is beside the point.

Berlin's famous distinction between positive and negative freedom. It consists of choice/opportunity, non-interference and non-domination. The second threefold typology encompasses the level of focus that articulations of freedom pertain to, namely systemic, individual or socio-institutional. In addition to these tripartite distinctions, two other conceptual dyads appear relevant for assessing freedom in the context of the international: freedom can be articulated instrumentally or as an intrinsic value, and it can assume inward-looking and outward-bounded manifestations.

In the case of the US, the articulations of freedom across three different presidential administrations were found to track the two potentially conflicting interpretations of American exceptionalism – the exemplary and the missionary traditions. However, for each presidential administration, the subplots within these broad thematics exhibit differences. For both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the perfection of freedom at home on both the individual and systemic levels would guarantee America's ability to do better in the world. At the same time, both administrations embraced an active role in the world for the United States, with Bush stressing maximum freedom of manoeuvre for the hegemon and the realisation of (largely) negative freedoms for peoples in the periphery. Obama called for a more circumscribed approach; one stressing positive opportunities for people in follower states, marked by non-domination and non-interference by the hegemon. In Donald Trump's America, freedom is equated with non-interference from the outside, a fear of negative diffusions flowing from abroad, and hardly constitutes a value worthy of promotion internationally. As a third key thematic, for Bush and Trump freedom also functioned as a marker of "civilisational leadership", setting the West apart from the "rest" – an othering impulse that serves as a potent reminder of the less savoury aspects of American exceptionalism and hegemony.

The article thus illustrates how the intrinsic attributes of hegemony – particularly America's identity as an exceptional nation and the values that are constitutive of that identity – link up to the architecture of the hegemonic order. However, the way that this takes place is hardly a unilinear. Instead, different policymakers interpret the ideational building blocks of America, its essence, differently, as is the case with the US elite discourses on freedom. The sustainability, maintenance and evolution of hegemony in its American guise can therefore track the oscillation of ideational orthodoxies within the United States.

The article finds both differences and similarities in the articulations of freedom between the EU and the US. On the one hand, this variance underwrites a shared commitment to freedom as a concept; there is enough commonality during the time period under scrutiny to speak of a shared discourse in the broadest sense. On the other hand, differences regarding the freedom of individuals from government interference and, particularly, the civilisational discourse propounded by the Bush

and especially the Trump administration (effectively implying hegemonic domination) show that disparities exist in terms of how central values of the "consensual-hegemonic bargain" are interpreted across the Atlantic. The Western core of the hegemonic order remains both connected and divided *in* and *by* freedom. There is thus potential for both rejuvenation and further fracturing of the shared value base across the Atlantic, space for both success and failure.

Finally, *Original Publication IV* zooms in on the intrinsic drivers of hegemony by tracking domestic contestation over what kind (or any kind?) of a hegemon the United States should be. The article illustrates that the evolution of Donald J. Trump's foreign policy – the "Trump doctrine" – can neither be understood, nor its potential pitfalls analysed, without first situating this emergent approach within the discursive field of post-Cold War foreign policy debates about America's global role. These debates do not appear as mere conceptual parlour games played within the Washington foreign policy establishment and academia, but instead serve to set the boundaries of both fathomable policy formulation and feasible action in American international engagement.

The article argues that although the current president is a *sui generis* actor, it is possible to decipher an emerging "Trump doctrine", which is an amalgamation of different schools of thought on US foreign policy. In this sense Trump – the great disruptor – and his administration more broadly articulate a foreign policy vision partially in line *with*, but also in contradistinction *to*, approaches that make up the discursive field of post-Cold War American foreign policy debates.

The so-called "Trump doctrine", then, has been constructed as an antithesis of liberal internationalism, particularly a critique of the "deep engagement" consensus that has undergirded US foreign policy making for decades. Trump's foreign policy approach also draws on civilisational themes from the neoconservative canon of the Bush era. This is compounded with a materialist, zero-sum and crudely realist worldview and a transactionalism which, at times, leads to an embrace of (neo)isolationist insights. This Trumpian hybrid of four American foreign policy traditions can be called *transactionalist realism with civilisational undertones*. Therefore, Trump's foreign policy thinking is at least partially a product – albeit a peculiar one – of American strategic culture.

When it comes to US hegemony, however, this Trumpian approach appears problematic. First, Trump's zero-sum approach is hardly cognisant of the social relations that legitimise US hegemony. To make matters worse, his civilisational tropes risk rendering clashes between the West and the "rest" into self-fulfilling prophecies. Moreover, Trump's transactionalist inclinations make it difficult for the hegemon's leadership to think in a long- rather than short-term manner, an impediment to the prudent use of the hegemon's power.

In other words, implementation of the "Trump doctrine" might tear asunder not only the established channels of conducting interactions (infrastructure) within the US hegemonic order by angering allies, partners and adversaries, but also the various institutional forms and forums that have been integral to ensuring the longevity of the order's normative architecture. The gear shift in US foreign policy espoused by president Trump and his team may thus further erode America's ability to lead in the 21st century, tantamount to a case of self-induced hegemonic failure. A longer-term commitment to such a Trumpian approach could embolden adversaries, weaken institutions, and provide allies and partners with added reason to begin hedging their bets. In this manner, the importance of the intrinsic ideational foundations of American hegemony, both in the discursive sphere in the form of foreign policy debates and on the level of political leaders' foreign policy formulations, is again underlined.

In ***Chapter 5***, the thesis concludes with a reflective discussion. This short exposition utilises the theoretical framework and the insights attained through the original publications to shed light on a present-day crisis, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and the concomitant US reaction to it. This is followed by a discussion on the possible omissions of the present study, some suggestions regarding future research, and a short synthesis regarding the key value-added of the dissertation.

2 A peculiar hegemon: the *longue durée* of US global engagement

The United States is a peculiar state. Therefore, it should not be surprising that its hegemonic engagement with the world has often been viewed as unique. This section looks, first, at American exceptionalism as a key ideational driver of such peculiarity. It then swiftly summarises the prevalent understanding of how this exceptional(ist) state – an ocean removed from the power-political quarrels of the old world – ultimately came to assume a global superpower role with a hegemonic vision of international order.

2.1 The mythology of American hegemony

It is commonplace to posit that since its inception the United States has been an "extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; a nation that is not only *unique* but also *superior*" (McCrisken 2002, 63; emphasis added). The US has, so we are told, a peculiar "American Creed" that has formed through the centuries of the nation's existence and renders the United States different, a class apart from the rest of the world. This creed is enshrined into the foundational documents of the nation, and was famously summed up by Swedish sociologist/economist Gunnar Myrdal (1964, 4) to include ideas like "the dignity of the individual human being", "the fundamental equality of all men" and the "inalienable rights to freedom, justice and fair opportunity". In Daniel Deudney and Jeffrey Meiser's (2008, 25) interpretation:

> America is exceptional, both in fact and perception, because more than any other state in history it has embodied and advanced an ideological vision of a way of life centred upon freedom, in politics, in economics, and in society.

It thus borders on accepted wisdom that an "exceptionalist myth" is a central building block of Americans' self-conception, of the identity of the United States as an international actor and, conceivably, of the US as a particular type of hegemon (Hanhimäki 2003, 440).

For present purposes, "an identity is the understanding of oneself in relationship to others" (Barnett 1999, 9), and as such it functions as "a property of intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioural dispositions" (Wendt 1999, 224). If we consider the state to be an "anthropomorphised actor" that can be granted a modicum of "corporate agency" (*ibid*., 195–197, 230–31), it is feasible to conceptualise the formation of its identity in terms of *both* the interactions it has with other actors on the international arena and the ideational currents that flow from the domestic sphere (Ruggie 1998, 872–873). The identities of states are therefore irredeemably social, they are formed intersubjectively (Wendt 1999, 224; Ruggie 1998, 879; Finnemore and Sikkink 2002, 399). Actors can have many different identities, but these are always tied to their place in social structures. It is thus conceivable that some identities are more important for an actor than others (Wendt 1992, 398; 1994, 385; 1999, 230–31). Moreover, identities of corporate actors are also malleable. They are in a process of incessant renegotiation, but sufficiently entrenched as not to be randomly changing – crises or shocks, however, tend to exacerbate contestation over identity (Barnett 1999, 9–10; cf. Legro 2000). All this implies that American exceptionalism, insofar as the notion is constitutive of America's identity as an international actor, has both an inward-facing and outward-looking dimension. As such, the notion "provides an essential element of the cultural and intellectual framework for the making and conduct of U.S. foreign policy" (McCrisken 2002, 63; see also Section 3.2.4 below).

While the role of exceptionalism as an identitarian backgrounder for US foreign engagement is habitually rehearsed in the scholarly literature, as a term of art exceptionalism remains inherently fraught and imprecise. This lends it to potentially conflicting interpretations (see *e.g.* Cha 2015; Löfflmann 2015; Hughes 2015); it can be drawn upon by politicians, pundits and scholars alike to pin down the essence of America and, based on this essence, counsel the country towards different courses of foreign policy action. The literature tends to distil two broad understandings of American exceptionalism, an "exemplary" and a "missionary" strand (McCrisken 2002, 64–66).

The *exemplary* tradition is often traced to the idea of the United States as "a 'shining city on a hill', a permanent criticism to the corruption and depravity of the old world" (C. Kennedy 2013, 626). This understanding of exceptionalism has been traced back to a sermon by Puritan leader John Winthrop, which, so we are told, took place aboard the *Arbella* in 1630 (Nayak and Malone 2009, 264–65). Other frequently cited and canonised points of reference are George Washington's (1796) farewell address, wherein he counselled the United States "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world", Thomas Jefferson's (1801) warning against "entangling alliances", and Secretary of State (later President) John Quincy Adams's (1821) assertion that America "goes not abroad in

search of monsters to destroy" so as not to be entangled in "wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition".[3]

The *missionary* tradition, in contrast, can be dated to 19th-century ideas of "Manifest Destiny" and the "Monroe doctrine", both founded upon America's alleged providential right and duty to spread its values across the North American continent and, later, further afield (McCrisken 2002, 67–68). The missionary tradition also foregrounded Theodore Roosevelt's expansionist policy forays on the Western Hemisphere, as well as early US liberal internationalism in its Wilsonian guise. It was certainly also present in the thinking of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, George Marshall and Harry S. Truman, key architects of the post-World War II institution-building that was undertaken by a victorious United States (*ibid*., 70–75; see also Tomes 2014, 34–41).

A well-rehearsed argument is that exemplarism pulls the US towards an *aloof* or *isolationist* foreign policy approach, one that steers clear of political and military engagements in the affairs of others. The missionary tradition, in contrast, implies a more *internationalist* global engagement, with the ultimate goal of not merely pursuing US interests, but also of spreading American ideas and values around the world (McCrisken 2002, 65; see also Restad 2012, 56–57). In this vein, US foreign policy has been viewed as *either* cyclically oscillating between more and less activist phases of global engagement (Dueck 2006; Sestanovich 2014), *or* as having gone through a formative period of transformation from isolationist to internationalist in the first four decades of the 20th century (Nye 2019a; Ikenberry 2001; Legro 2005).

Others have taken issue with the exemplary/missionary dichotomy, claiming that such a neat division not only obscures the multifarious nature of American exceptionalism, but also underplays the internationalist (as opposed to isolationist) elements of continuity that have marked US foreign policy at least since the founding of the republic. Hilde Restad (2012, 64–68), for instance, points out that America's founders were not only trying to escape the corruptions of the old world, they were also committed to spreading European *civilisation* into the wilderness of the new world – they were effectively both exemplarists and missionaries. This means that from its inception American exceptionalism entailed both a desire to be different and an aspiration to educate, and eventually even assimilate, the Others. In terms of US foreign policy, then, this means that American conduct in its own backyard throughout the 19th century was hardly isolationist or aloof, quite the contrary, in fact. The US was a great power in its neighbourhood, engaging in expansionary foreign policy practices and visionary world-making, even imperialism.

[3] For this storyline, see only Tomes (2014).

Yet, upon closer inspection, this quarrel appears to be about conceptual intricacies and vantage points rather than the utility of American exceptionalism as a concept to foreground scholarly endeavours *per se*. From the standpoint of involvement in European great-power politics outside its own hemisphere, and especially on the Eurasian landmass, US aloofness lasted until World War I (see below). Historian Stephen Wertheim (2018, 126–27; emphasis added) summarises the crux of the issue succinctly:

> Even as the United States fulfilled its 'manifest destiny' to conquer territory and exercise hegemony in the virgin New World, it swore off political and military entanglement in the corrupting Old World. Centuries later, although the nation reversed its posture of exemplary separation in favor of one of global intervention, its presidents still quoted Winthrop. United States continued to imagine itself as leading the world, whether through the *power of its example* or *the example of its power*.

It is certainly also true that exceptionalism *per se* is not a US-specific phenomenon. Kalevi J. Holsti (2011, 384), for instance, posits five features of an "exceptionalist foreign policy type": a "mission to liberate", the lack of "external constraints", a perception of a "hostile world", a need for "external enemies" and self-portrayal as an "innocent victim". Historically these attributes need not be confined to the US, and it is likewise debatable to what extent each of them has been present at different stages of US foreign engagement. Moreover, great powers as diverse as Great Britain, the Soviet Union and even the European Union – an economic giant with hardly a military footprint to speak of – have been in the business of promoting, and in the last resort imposing, their norms and values upon others (De Zutter 2010).

The fact that *American* exceptionalism is a social construct, and admittedly has more of a normative/prescriptive as opposed to objective quality (Restad 2012, 69), does not render it an irrelevant notion when studying US foreign policy. It is hardly contested that appeals to exceptionalism have been used throughout the centuries by American politicians to legitimise different ways of "being" and acting in the world (Hanhimäki 2003, 440; see also Löfflmann 2015).[4] In this sense, exceptionalism, whether of the exemplary or missionary strand, forms an important identitarian baseline for appreciating the contours – and peculiarities – of *American* hegemony in the 20th and 21st centuries.

[4] Even the most critical readings of the notion would likely agree with this formulation of exceptionalism as a discursive legitimising device, see only Hughes (2015, 533–35).

2.2 Post-World War II orders

The story of the United States' coming of age as a truly globally engaged great power in the crucible of the First and Second World Wars has been retold many times over.[5] The following discussion does not pretend to be a holistic account of events, instead stressing pivotal developments and key concepts that are particularly relevant for the discussion on American hegemony in due course. However, when it comes to appreciating the intricacies, not to mention pervasiveness, of American hegemony, the current discussion seeks to illuminate that for better or for worse, "[t]he United States has been 'present at the creation' at the last three moments of systemic remaking" (Kitchen and Cox 2019, 743).

The US decision to enter World War I can be viewed as a key shift in America's global engagement – for the first time in its history the US took sides in European great power quarrels outside its own hemisphere. However, in a nod to America's exceptionalist tradition, President Woodrow Wilson did *not* appeal to geopolitical rationales to defend America's entry into the war (Dueck 2006, 46). Instead, the president "wrapped his choice in American moralism"; the famous Fourteen Points Speech on 8 January 1918 contained Wilson's vision of how America's domestic creed would be transplanted into the international arena, and, in the process, both US foreign engagement and the manner in which international relations were conducted would be transformed (Nye 2019a, 66).

At the time, neither the world nor the United States was ultimately ready for this kind of visionary world order making, as the US decision to intervene in the First World War presented only a short-term victory for internationalist voices in America. Still, there was a notable peculiarity to the ensuing wrangling over American entry into the League of Nations. The rejection of the Treaty of Versailles in the US Senate, and the subsequent return to aloofness, was the result of bitter wrangling between two factions, one advocating multilateralist and the other unilateralist solutions to international engagement. In other words, both of these camps held ideas that were fundamentally internationalist. Isolationist sentiments carried the day not because of their inherent appeal, but by default; American politicians could not agree amongst themselves what a globally engaged United States would look like. And yet, by the 1930s the utter disenchantment with the failure of the US intervention into the European theatre in 1917 to create a better world was sufficiently entrenched into America's collective psyche that it took the trauma of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour to awake the sleeping giant (Ruggie 1997, 93–98; Legro 2005, 60–68).

[5] On accounts particularly relevant for the present exposition, see *e.g.* Dueck (2006, 44–113), Ikenberry (2001; 2012), Legro (2005, 49–83) and Schake (2017).

Unlike at the end of the First World War, the United States did not retreat from the global stage after the allied victory over Nazi Germany and Japan. With the promulgation of the "Truman doctrine" (Merrill 2006), the US tied itself to aiding (democratic) nations outside America's own hemisphere to combat the threat posed by Soviet communism. The power-political and ideological contest between the two victorious superpowers of the Second World War thus materialised into the overbearing structural and ideological condition of international political life in the span of just a few years. In the process, the containment of Soviet power became the grand-strategic imperative of American foreign policy for over four decades. This "'containment order' […] was [thus] a settlement based on the balance of power, nuclear deterrence and political and ideological competition" (Ikenberry 2001, 170). For the first time in the relatively young nation's history US foreign policy became a truly global exercise in power projection. As Ruggie (1997, 90) puts it, "[p]erceptions of the Soviet military threat coupled with anticommunist ideological fervor […] resolved a historic American dilemma", the inherent tension between aloofness and global engagement, between the exemplary and the missionary faces of America.

Alongside the containment rationale, the United States also became a driver in the establishment of a complex and multi-layered institutional order. This "liberal international order" (also sometimes termed the "liberal rule[s]-based order") was effectively the second and more diffuse prong of the postwar settlement, built on a scaffold of *multilateral institutions* (Ikenberry 1996; Brands 2016a). Initially these encompassed the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), but the array of institutions grew exponentially over the post-war decades. The flurry of institution-building was, of course, also imbued with a strong *normative agenda*. Liberal values intrinsic to industrialised democracies, and not least the domestic political arrangements of the would-be hegemon, including human rights and representative government, were thought vital for the functioning of the post-war order. These were bolstered by norms meant to govern interstate conduct, namely non-aggression, self-determination and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Vitally, the institutional fabric that was being weaved also had an *economic rationale*; it would ultimately carry forward the torch of free trade and market-based solutions. At the same time, NATO and the bilateral alliance between the US and defeated Japan gave the order its requisite *security foundations* (see *e.g.* Ikenberry 2001, 163–214; 2012, 159–219; 2015b; Deudney and Ikenberry 1999; Brands 2016a, 1–5; Patrick 2016; Nye 2019a).

The emergence of the liberal international order was certainly aided by the liberal-democratic essence of the American project; as John G. Ruggie (1992, 568; emphasis in original) puts it:

> When we look more closely at the post-World War II situation […] we find that it was less the fact of American *hegemony* that accounts for the explosion of multilateral arrangements than it was the fact of *American* hegemony.

And yet, this new hegemon of (less than) half the world did not undertake such order-building out of mere benevolence. As the US assumed its role as the order's great-power guarantor, it effectively became a supplier of "global public goods such as freer trade and freedom of the seas […] [while] weaker states were given institutional access to the exercise of US power" (Nye 2017, 11). This grand bargain reached between the hegemon and its followers had a dual effect. On the one hand, the established institutions cast America's outsized influence into the future by locking in organisational forms, norms and values that reflected, in large part, the preferences of the hegemon. On the other hand, in order to assuage other states' fears of both domination and abandonment, the US went along with institutional solutions that made its power more bearable for allies and partners, and thus rendered its superpower role more predictable. Leadership of a stable liberal international order thus necessitated a long-term political commitment to its norms, values and institutions, and such a commitment meant forgoing the temptation to pursue short-term exigencies. In the process, the US gained an elaborate network of allies and partners – which functions as a veritable force multiplier to this day – not to mention considerable economic boons through a gradual liberalisation of global trade flows. The other states, in turn, received security guarantees and access to America's growing markets (Ikenberry 1998; 2001; Krisch 2005, 372–76). In this manner, the understanding that the US reached with its allies and partners led to security, economic and normative gains for both sides; it was an exercise in *consensual hegemony* (Maier 1977).

However, it also pays to note that such consensuality remained geographically limited. As the apocalyptic prospects of a nuclear war between the two superpowers rendered a direct confrontation increasingly unlikely, the Cold War confrontation swiftly moved into proxy theatres in the so-called periphery. Throughout the Cold War period, the US was willing to go to great lengths to check the spread of communism in the Third World, engaging in coercive (and often also covert) behaviour across the globe. In Odd Arne Westad's (2007, 38) interpretation:

> For official foreign policy […] the universal Cold War became the proper symbol of America's aims. It was a globalist vision that fitted the ideology and the power of the United States in the late twentieth Century, while being symmetrical with the character of its Communist enemy, an enemy that also portrayed itself as popular, modern, and international. The Cold War provided an extreme answer to a question that had been at the center of US foreign policy

> since the late eighteenth century: in what situations should ideological sympathies be followed by intervention? The extension of the Cold War into the Third World was defined by the answer: everywhere where Communism could be construed as a threat.

The paradox, therefore, was that engaging the Communist Second World in a struggle, a struggle in the name of freedom, meant supporting unsavoury local proxies. Even if such backing did not (always) mean that the hegemon was blatantly exchanging America's ideals for power-political and nakedly self-interested rationales, it took place with disastrous consequences for the populaces of these states and the concomitant credibility and legitimacy of the United States both in these states and on the American domestic-political arena (*ibid*., 37–38, 396; see also McMahon 2001).

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, for instance, America's espousal of a core set of interests – Israeli security, the flow of energy and combatting of Soviet influence – alienated the Arab populaces and would ultimately come to haunt the United States in the post-Cold War era (Miller 2009; Gerges 2013, 29–36, 48–54; Cook 2012, 249–252). This is an issue that shall also be taken up in two of the original publications (I and II; see also Sections 4.1 and 4.2) included in the present exposition. In the periphery the US was hardly a benevolent leviathan, its conduct bordered on the imperial (cf. Maier 2003; Nexon and Wright 2007). It would be a stretch of the imagination, then, to call this core-periphery dynamic either liberal or rules-based. As Barry Buzan (1991, 434) duly points out, "[t]he identity 'Third World' signified an oppositional stance to the West and generated the distinctive ideologies of Non-Alignment and *tiersmondism*", in short, implying confrontation, not stability or consensual rule.

2.3 Hegemonic visions of order in a post-Cold War world

The end of the Cold War brought the collapse of Soviet communism and the concomitant containment order. The predominantly Western "inside" liberal international order suddenly became the "outside" order encompassing broad swathes of the globe (Ikenberry 2012, 221–53; 2015a). This meant that the intimate link between the functioning of the two post-war orders broke down. If anything, the threat of the Soviet Union had helped fortify the Western core of the liberal international order by making American power more acceptable for allies and partners who sought protection and wanted to restrain the United States' ability to throw its weight around (Skidmore 2005). One prominent interpretation, then, is that the seeds for an eventual unravelling of the liberal international order – and

America's hegemonic stewardship of that order – were sown at the time of its grandest triumph (Ikenberry 2018a). Under unipolarity, the US was suddenly the dominant state in the relevant categories used by IR scholars to study power capabilities, whether of the military, economic or "soft" variant (Wohlforth 1999; Nye 2004).

At the onset of what Charles Krauthammer (1990) famously termed America's "unipolar moment", the tenuous equilibrium between the hegemon and its followers was no longer a given. The United States' preponderance was posited to mean less incentives for the US to restrain itself, lending more space for visionary world-making (Kitchen 2010), or, in a less neutral formulation, more space for the "imperial temptations" or "imperial overstretch" that had derailed the superpowers of the past (J. Snyder 2003; Florig 2010). In fact, by the end of the Cold War, a consensus of sorts had emerged in the United States foreign policy circles over an internationalist as opposed to aloof approach to the world. The animating division of the first decades of the "unipolar moment" was, then, over the level of constraints that the hegemon was willing to accept, between "unilateralist" and "multilateralist" approaches to the world (Daalder and Lindsay 2003).

However, as the systemic constraints on American power eroded, so did trust of other stakeholders of the order that the hegemon would not utilise its newfound position of preponderance to pursue narrow self-interested goals without consultation and cooperation (Kydd 2005a). Post-9/11 unilateralism in US foreign policy, which reached its apogee with the "Bush doctrine" and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, seemed to turn such fears into reality (see *e.g.* Reus-Smit 2004a; Hastings Dunn 2006; Daalder and Lindsay 2003; Jervis 2016). As if getting bogged down in seemingly endless wars in the Middle East had not dented the superpower's shield enough, by the time the global financial crisis struck in late 2007, there was little left of the post-Cold War triumphalism in US foreign policy community.

Much ink has since been spilled exploring the intricacies of an impending, or already underway, *power transition* from the US and the West to the rising "rest" (cf. Zakaria 2011; Kupchan 2012; Acharya 2017; Layne 2011; Nye 2015). In fact, the list of challenges for US global leadership grew during the second decade of the 21st century. In 2011, the Arab Spring, which began as a bottom-up movement of the region's populaces for a better tomorrow, unleashed a period of authoritarian regression, regional instability and internal strife in the Middle East. In the meantime, the fallout of the Iraqi imbroglio and the chaos of the Syrian civil war – with which the administration of Barack Obama struggled to deal – created a power vacuum that was exploited first by the so-called Islamic State, then America's designated regional foe Iran, and eventually the Al-Assad regime and Russia. The unfolding events in the Middle East also sparked unprecedented migration flows into Europe, leaving the EU and its member states – America's closest allies – with the

insurmountable task of dealing with the influx of refugees (see *e.g.* Ashford 2018; Quandt 2014; Gerges 2013; Brands 2016b). On the military front, Russia's actions in Ukraine as well as Chinese maritime ambitions in Southeast Asia spurred talk of the "return of geopolitics" to Europe and the Indo-Pacific (Mead 2014).

Other non-Western great powers, most notably China and Russia, were initially envisioned to assume the role of "responsible stakeholders" in the enlarged post-1989 liberal international order. However, they have gradually come to assume the mantle of challengers or spoilers. When the post-war institutional bargains were being hashed out in the West, these states had little say in negotiations over the order's foundational norms and institutions. The rules of the order, not to mention the terms under which the order can be joined, have been originally set forth by the West (Vezirgiannidou 2013; Mastanduno 2019). In today's increasingly interconnected world, this is no longer the case. Contestation over the normative architecture and institutional makeup of the international order looks to increase in the coming decades (Hurrell 2006; Prantl 2014), and it will play out in various spheres, whether trade, development assistance or norms governing cyberspace. A most vital case is the conditionality of sovereignty, encompassing the legality and legitimacy of interventions, as well as questions of authority when engaging in such forays. Such conundrums have been brought to the fore by Russian and Chinese criticism over American-led interventions in Kosovo (1999) and Libya (2011), as well as the global outcry over Russia's recent incursion into Ukraine (Ikenberry 2015a; Bellamy and Reike 2011; Garwood-Gowers 2013; Koskenniemi 2002).

As these dynamics have unfolded, globalisation has also run apace – the transnational arena has become littered with actors who vie for a place in the sun alongside states, a phenomenon Nye (2011, 113–151) has referred to as "power diffusion". This cavalcade of agents includes multinational corporations (MNCs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cities, regions, even influential individuals. The field also contains insidious players, whether these be criminal cartels, terrorist organisations or hackers. This increased complexity renders power more difficult for states, even for the superpower of the day, to exercise. At the same time, the instantaneous interconnectedness of the whole globe through cyberspace has opened up new channels of influence and a novel arena of great-power competition (*ibid.*; see also Carr 2016; Choucri 2012; Nocetti 2015). The election-influencing operation conducted against the 2016 presidential election in the United States is perhaps the most high-profile case in point (Aaltola and Mattiisen 2016).

However, it appears that the greatest challenge for the US-led order is emanating not from the outside in the form of great-power competition or other disruptive actors, but from within the Western core. For obvious reasons, recent headlines have focused on disruptive agency and the 45th president of the United States. In G. John Ikenberry's (2017, 2) assessment: "a hostile revisionist power […] sits in the Oval

Office, the beating heart of the free world". Thomas Wright (2016) argues that Trump's inclination is to rewind to a 19th-century foreign policy built on three core beliefs:

> He is deeply unhappy with America's military alliances and feels the United States is overcommitted around the world. He feels that America is disadvantaged by the global economy. And he is sympathetic to authoritarian strongmen.

Yet, the rise of Donald Trump to the presidency is merely the tip of the iceberg, his presidency is not the cause of the malaise of the US-led order; it is at best a symptom. As Original Publication IV of the current exposition will argue, Trump is not as much of a rupture in American foreign policy thinking as the barrage of headlines over the last three and a half years would have us believe.

Defenders and detractors of the liberal international order agree on the malaise: support for globalisation – arguably a manifestation of the liberal international order's successful transformation into a global edifice – has waned in the West as its negative externalities, especially in the form of economic insecurity, have become abundantly clear (Ikenberry 2018a; Acharya 2017; Schweller 2018b). In fact, the challenge from within the West goes well beyond the Trump presidency and political polarisation in the United States. The European Union is at a perilous moment in its history, whether one looks at Brexit, democratic backsliding in Central and East European countries like Hungary or Poland, or the electoral successes of parties on the right in long-established democracies like the Netherlands, Finland or Sweden. It is clear that support for the core tenets of liberal internationalism – democracy, human rights, rule of law, multilateralism, multiculturalism, even economic interdependence – is strained and waning. In James Traub's (2017) interpretation, the liberal world order is thus undergoing a "crisis of faith" – the order's *liberal* foundations are being questioned within the very states that were most instrumental in its success.

###

The above exposition on America's coming of age as a superpower with a global vision of order has been written to serve as an entry point of sorts. In its descriptiveness, the purpose of the discussion has been largely instrumental: to swiftly acquaint the reader with the ebb and flow in America's global role and the order it has undergirded. This foregrounds the forthcoming largely theoretical and conceptual discussion on hegemony. The preceding more historically-oriented introductory exercise has been carried out even at the risk of creating some

repetition, in the hope that such a cursory mapping of the terrain will aid in contextualising the at times tedious debates that IR scholars and American foreign policy pundits are prone to when engaging with their subject matter, in this case with the concept and phenomenon of US hegemony. It is to these intriguing intricacies that the study now turns.

3 On the concept of (US) hegemony

Historically, the role of leading states in the international system has been important in both the emergence and maintenance of international order. In fact, the tale of relations among states through the ages, and of international order-building, is perhaps less a story of anarchy and balance of power than many canonical studies might let on (see *e.g.* Morgenthau 1955; Waltz 1979; Bull 1977).[6] Empires and other hierarchical arrangements, including hegemonic orders, have been ever-present in world history (see only Ikenberry 2012, 55; Hurrell 2007, 263–67; Kupchan 2014; Nexon and Wright 2007; Nexon 2009), even if they have not, strictly speaking, encompassed the whole of the international system. In fact, the liberal international order and America's concomitant hegemonic reach have not at any point, even to the present day, encompassed the entire globe. Although America's order-building has certainly been universal in aspiration, the order that was founded after World War II has to this day remained partial in scope. Most obviously, as already laid out, in the era of Cold War bipolarity the liberal international order was for all intents and purposes the order of the West. More recently, certain states – whether Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya or North Korea – have been pushed, or have chosen to stay, outside the liberal international order.

The largely theoretical discussion that follows does not pretend to be an exhaustive review of hegemony-related literature. Such an appraisal could easily span a bookshelf's worth of academic volumes. The following cannot, then, even begin to do justice to the richness of the discussion on the concept within IR, not to mention other disciplines of import, including International Law, Political Science or Sociology. Instead, the purpose of the exposition is instrumental in a twofold sense. Firstly, it endeavours to make this study's titular concept intelligible to the reader by elaborating on its "meaning-in-use" within the present context. The crux of the discussion thus falls upon *Anglo-American* academic and to a lesser extent policy-oriented literature, which grapples with questions of *American* hegemony.

[6] In this sense, hegemony is a relative notion, it connotes *an extent of hierarchy*, where anarchy and hierarchy can be thought of as two poles on a continuum (cf. Layne 2006b, 11–12).

Secondly, the forthcoming elaboration is necessary to make a case for studying the *intrinsic*, *ideational*, *social* and *relational* aspects of US hegemony, seeing as the concept is often defined predominantly in terms of material capabilities. At times it is even conflated with a particular, namely unipolar, distribution of power capabilities in the international arena. As Philip G. Cerny (2005, 67) rightly points out, "[t]he very definition of hegemony is contested", based as it is on assumptions the theorist makes about such fundamental questions as the nature of power, the levels of analysis, and the relationship between agents and structures in the international system.

The forthcoming discussion proposes a novel distinction between what shall henceforth be termed three *images of hegemony*, namely *material*, *intrinsic* and *socio-institutional*. In other words, it is possible to use insights of authors from various theoretical traditions to distil a tripartite framework to make sense of hegemony as a concept, in general, and the American manifestation of hegemony, in particular.[7] Given the vast amount of literature on hegemony, these images are but snapshots on the titular concept of the study. Ultimately, however, they – along with the four original publications – will comprise a collage of sorts, leading to one unique albeit imperfect illustration of America's hegemonic challenges and failures in the 21st century.

3.1 The material image of hegemony

It might seem odd to embark on an exposition of the ideational and social building blocks of American hegemony with a material, capabilities-based account. However, so prominent is the sway of such understandings of the concept within IR that they can hardly be papered over. In fact, the material image provides a crucial baseline for understanding the other two images of hegemony, to be discussed in due course.

7 There are, of course, many other similar typologies, given that hegemony is a much-debated concept. To provide some illustrations, Daniel Deudney (2014, 201) argues that there are essentially three approaches to hegemony, two realist camps, the first of which views hegemony as short-lived due to the counterbalancing constraint, while the second argues that hegemony is prone to stability (see discussion in section 3.1.1 below). These are complemented by a third approach that focuses on the "liberal and capitalist character of the American hegemon" (*ibid*.). Lavina Rajendram Lee (2010), in turn, distinguishes between materialist and normative approaches, with the former connoting different realist appraisals of the concept alongside liberal-institutionalist takes on hegemonic stability theory, and the latter including (neo-)Gramscian and constructivist appraisals. Brian C. Schmidt (2018), somewhat similarly, sees a difference between approaches that stress hegemony as "overwhelming power" and "leadership".

3.1.1 Power capabilities and hegemony

In the contemporary IR literature, and oftentimes in everyday parlance, hegemony tends to be equated with *material* might – it is thus often used synonymously with great power, empire or primacy, and sometimes conflated with the distribution of power capabilities in the international system (see *e.g.* Groh and Lockhart 2015; Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Posen 2003). Robert Gilpin's (1981, 29) definition of hegemony as a constellation wherein "[a] single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system" serves as an archetypal baseline for a contemporary structural realist understanding of hegemony, and pervades many an IR exposition on the topic. Another contemporary realist, John J. Mearsheimer (2001, 40; emphasis added), argues that a hegemon's exorbitant power and concomitant dominance "of all the other states in the system" means that "[n]o other state has the *military* wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it". Stephen G. Brooks (2012, 27 n. 1) chooses to forgo reference to dominance, and instead maintains that the hegemon is simply "a state that has the largest share of material capabilities in the system". Hegemony also connotes unipolarity, a structural state of affairs in the international system in which one actor is preponderant in terms of the traditional indicators of economic and military power, but also harbours advantages in terms of population, endowment of natural resources and the functioning of state organisations (Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth 2008, 5–11).

In a much-cited formulation, in the hegemonic stability theory (HST) tradition, Robert Gilpin (1981, 144–45; see also Kindleberger 1981) maintains that a hegemonic state is instrumental for the sustainability of international order as a provider of public goods, essentially a supplier of stable security and economic order. In this argument, such goods would not be provided in the international arena without the presence of such a hegemonic state. However, for Gilpin (1981, esp. chaps. 4 and 5), there comes a point at which the provision of public goods, initially in the hegemon's *interests* insofar as the returns for supporting the order have outweighed maintenance costs, becomes a drain on the superpower's resources. At this stage, so the argument runs, the hegemon's relative power position starts to decline as the costs of order maintenance outstrip the benefits, opening up the avenue for a rising challenger to upend the *status quo* – sowing the seeds of a *hegemonic transition*.

There is an air of inevitability about the drivers of relative material decline, which are both external and internal. In the former case, the "costs of dominance" are driven up by "detrimental shifts in the international distribution of power" and through the diffusion of technology from the hegemon to other states in the international arena (Gilpin 1981, 169). In the latter case, many of the causes are economic in nature. For instance, as the hegemon matures and develops, it risks becoming hampered by the law of diminishing returns. The costs of fighting wars to

maintain its hegemonic position may also be driven up. Other dynamics, like public and private consumption growing faster than GNP, or shifts in the domestic economic structure from manufacturing towards services are also pertinent. Finally, there are other pathologies linked to affluence, like the emergence of conflicts between public and private interests, a lust for expansion, and the unwillingness to commit sufficient resources to satiate said lust (*ibid*., 159–185). The international system, by virtue of such dynamics, thus exhibits a tendency towards successive (and fairly long) periods of distinctly hierarchical orders, wherein a profound power asymmetry exists between the hegemon and other states:

> From this perspective, *changes in relative power*, which ultimately derive from long-run variations in economic growth, are a mainspring of international political conflict. Economic change redistributes relative power over time, creating a natural tendency for divergences to emerge between power and privilege in world politics, which encourages rising states to challenge the status quo. A central problem in International Relations is addressing these changes to the balance of power, which historically has commonly been resolved by war. (Kirshner 2012, 54; emphasis added)

The fate of the prevailing international order and the hegemon's material preponderance appear, for all intents and purposes, coterminous.[8]

However, this depiction by no means represents accepted theoretical orthodoxy in IR structural realism. Accounts of hegemony diverge considerably over the potential longevity and geographical reach of hegemony. For balance-of-power or defensive realists like Kenneth Waltz (1979), a situation where a single state holds a disproportionate amount of material power assets will drive other states towards balancing behaviour, either through internal balancing (the build-up of assets, especially military ones) or external balancing (the formation of alliances to counter

[8] There is a related, overlapping and vibrant research programme with an empirical bent under the banner of *power transition theory*; for concise reviews see DiCicco and Levy (1996) and Kim and Gates (2015). Here the idea is that the likelihood of great-power war between the incumbent hegemon and challenger is highest as the latter achieves power parity and is on the cusp of overtaking the old leader – with power defined in terms of "population, economic productivity and the political ability to extract resources from society" (Levy 2015, 18). Crucially, for a clash to occur, the rising state must also become increasingly dissatisfied with the prevailing *status quo* in the system (*ibid*., 13–15).

the hegemon's preponderance) (*ibid*., 168).[9] The notion of balancing springs from the tenets of traditional balance of power theory. The core structural realist assumption of the international as an anarchical self-help system comprised of states bent on survival automatically leads states to compete for power. The logic is deceptively simple: as a state's power capabilities expand it will need to accumulate yet more power to safeguard already acquired assets – its interests expand, rendering it increasingly threatening to other actors, who will reciprocate with the accumulation of assets and/or building up of alliances (Waltz 1979, 127; Paul 2005, 51). Hegemony, from this standpoint, is a short-lived, ephemeral phenomenon.

In contrast, John Mearsheimer (2001, 35, 40–43), a proponent of *offensive realism*,[10] argues that no rational state will forgo the opportunity to pursue hegemony if its relative power position makes such a state of affairs attainable. This drive for material primacy is intrinsic to the climate of fear and distrust that pervades the anarchical international system (*ibid*., 32–33). However, there is a profound difference between Waltz's defensive and Mearsheimer's offensive variant of realism. In the former case, states maximise security, *i.e.* there is an amount of power with which they are ultimately content. In the latter instance, states are power-maximisers – eternally fearful and never secure, seeing as other states might at some time in the future amass sufficient power to challenge or even destroy them (G. H. Snyder 2002).[11] For Mearsheimer (2001) the twist is that although states *aspire* to be systemic hegemons, they can at most be expected to *achieve* regional hegemony. This is due to geographical realities, particularly the difficulty of projecting power over vast swathes of water. In this case, the US position is particularly fortuitous for maintaining regional hegemony in its own hemisphere, as it is removed from the Eurasian landmass by two oceans.

Stephen M. Walt (2006), another structural realist, agrees. In his reckoning, "[t]he United States is not a global hegemon, because it cannot physically control the entire globe and thus cannot compel other states to do whatever it wants". Instead, the US has a position of "primacy", because it "enjoys an asymmetry of power unseen since the emergence of the modern state system" (*ibid*., 4–5). Walt (2002, 133–39) also notably posits that states do not balance against power, but against threat. The latter is a function of relative power capabilities, the offensive versus

9 In both cases, balancing is ultimately "behavior designed to create a better range of outcomes for a state vis-à-vis another state or coalition of states by adding to the [predominantly military] power assets at its disposal, in an attempt to offset or diminish the advantages enjoyed by that other state or coalition" (Art 2006, 184–85).

10 This brand of structural realism has also been called "hegemonic realism" (Deudney and Ikenberry 2017).

11 For more discussion on the distinction between offensive and defensive realism, see *e.g.* Taliaferro (2000) and Mearsheimer (2013).

defensive nature of said capabilities, geographical proximity and intentions. In other words, a hegemon – like the United States – that is geographically removed from other great powers and is sufficiently powerful, can, through its own conduct, appear less threatening to others and thereby reduce the likelihood that other states will engage in balancing behaviour. In fact, it is entirely feasible that other states – America's European and Asian allies in particular – fear a retrenching United States more than they fear America's disproportionate preponderance in power capabilities (Mearsheimer 2001, 392).

Despite their differences, the common denominator in the above formulations of hegemony is that they draw on a capabilities-based definition of power, also sometimes termed the "elements of national power approach" (Schmidt 2005; Baldwin 2013). The endowments of states are viewed as quantifiable. Power is thus expressed in terms of the possession of material attributes of the military, economic, technological, geographical or demographic variety. This focus on material attributes of hegemony and their utility in dominating others explains, in part, the ubiquity of analyses that use quantitative measures of power to ascertain to what extent the United States, the incumbent hegemon, is in a state of decline (see *e.g.* Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Posen 2014; Quinn and Kitchen 2019). Such studies also underline that hegemony ebbs and flows in unison with changes in relative capabilities. Dynamics of change can only be unleashed when a hegemonic challenger musters up the requisite resources to take on the incumbent (Gilpin 1981, chap. 5).[12]

3.1.2 From describing to prescribing hegemony

Despite this apparent automaticity, theorists concerned primarily with the material image of hegemony have not refrained from offering recommendations on how the US *should* conduct itself in the international arena. This speaks to the inherent duality of hegemony as a concept, it is habitually used as a *description* of a material state of being and a *prescription* in the sense that it comprises a grand-strategic orientation,[13] one the US can opt to pursue. Hegemony can even be viewed as a

[12] This air of automaticity is likewise present in the power transition theory research programme, see Levy (2015, 15).

[13] Grand strategy is a contested concept. As Silove (2018) points out, it is variously used to refer to a plan, an organising principle and a long-term pattern of state conduct. For present purposes, grand strategy shall be understood to mean the last of these, although it pays to note that when theorists of grand strategy are cited in due course they might not necessarily agree with this choice. As understood here, detailed plans are merely strategies, while organising principles are foreign policy approaches or doctrines (see also Original Publication IV [p. 6., n. 9] for further clarification).

normatively desirable, or undesirable, state of being for both the hegemon itself and the international system writ large (cf. Brooks 2012; Layne 2006b). In the process, as theorists who ascribe to predictive theories regarding hegemony enter the realm of policy debate and prescription, they actually become vehicles in the reproduction, constitution and contestation that unfolds in the domestic academic, think tank and public spheres regarding America's "hegemonness".[14]

For defensive realists, hegemony is transitory at best and, by implication, seeking a sustained hegemonic position in the international arena through concerted policies is a futile, even dangerous pursuit. Writing on the situation after the Cold War, Kenneth Waltz (1993, 79) famously expected that "over time, unbalanced power will be checked by the responses of the weaker who will, rightly or not, feel put upon". The implication is that the US should have forgone any (liberal-)hegemonic designs and exercised "forbearance that will give other countries at long last the chance to deal with their own problems and to make their own mistakes" (*ibid*., 79).

More recently, proponents of the grand strategy of *offshore balancing*, including Mearsheimer and Walt (2016), have argued that the focus of the United States should be on maintaining its regional-hegemonic position in the Western Hemisphere, whilst making sure that no hostile regional hegemon with concomitant designs of global domination comes to control Europe, Northeastern Asia or the Persian Gulf. In practice, this would entail placing more security burdens on allies by disengaging from Europe and the Middle East militarily, while seeking to contain China's growing influence by remaining engaged in the Indo-Pacific. By assuming such a grand strategy the US would, so the argument runs, remain the most powerful state in the world, but avoid the inherent dangers of hegemonic hubris or imperial overstretch that might erode its preponderant position in the global power hierarchy by angering others and inducing them to engage in balancing behaviour (*ibid*.; Walt 2006, 222–23; 2018b).

Barry Posen (2003; 2013; 2014) makes a similar argument in advocating for a grand strategy of *restraint*. In his view, the US has "three […] security challenges: preventing a powerful rival from upending the global balance of power, fighting terrorists, and limiting nuclear proliferation" (Posen 2013, 123). This reading puts America's military command of the commons – of the sea, space and air – front and

[14] Of course, the obvious contradiction here is that insofar as realism, in its modern structural form, purports to put forth law-like propositions about how states *will* behave, it seems contradictory that such scholars should have to engage in reminding policymakers how a state *should* behave. There is an inherent tension between the claim that such theories are predictive and the art of policy prescription (see Barkin 2009).

centre as key determinants of its ability to pursue hegemony.[15] Such command has been further bolstered by America's elaborate global network of military bases, technological capabilities and economic prowess (Posen 2003, 19). However, such preponderance, albeit pervasive, may be an insufficient long-term foundation for the kind of liberal-hegemonic foreign policy that the US has pursued in the post-Cold War era. Instead, maintaining command should – so Posen's (*ibid*., 44–46; 2014, chap. 3) logic runs – actually allow the United States to reduce the burdens that befall a hegemon by moving offshore, but still maintain credible commitments to partners *and* deter adversaries from engaging in opportunistic forays.

On the other side of the divide reside proponents of *deep engagement*. At the height of American preponderance, a few years before the fateful events of 9/11, William Wohlforth (1999) argued that America's position atop the global power hierarchy looks to endure for a considerable time. On the one hand, the massive quantitative and qualitative advantage in all relevant (material) measures of power would discourage other states from engaging in balancing behaviour, because such attempts would be futile in the face of massive imbalances of power. On the other hand, being oceans removed from the Eurasian landmass means that any potential challenger to US hegemony would risk the formation of regional counterbalancing coalitions, ones that can check the rise of a hypothetical challenger to US ascendancy well before this aspirant can muster the necessary wherewithal to challenge America globally.

Broadening on the argument in a later volume, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) deem that deep engagement – essentially the commitment to underwriting the liberal international order – has been the default grand-strategic orientation of the US in the post-World War II era. As such it has entailed:

> (1) [m]anaging the external environment in key regions to reduce near- and long-term threats to US national security; (2) promoting a liberal economic order to expand the global economy and maximize domestic prosperity; (3) creating, sustaining and revising the global institutional order to secure necessary interstate cooperation on terms favourable to US interests (*ibid*., 75).

A key difference between deep engagement advocates and offshore balancers/restrainers is their interpretation of US overseas military presence. For the former, the benefits of deterring adversaries and assuring allies outweigh the costs –

[15] According to Posen (2003, 8), "command means that the United States gets vastly more military use out of the sea, space, and air than do others; that it can credibly threaten to deny their use to others; and that others would lose a military contest for the commons if they attempted to deny them to the United States".

whether economic or reputational – of maintaining America's vast military network (*ibid*., 88–154).[16] In Brooks and Wohlforth's (2008, 208) assessment, continued investment in retaining America's global commitments would actually forestall the re-emergence of balancing behaviour, given that "as the concentration of power increases beyond a certain threshold, systemic [*i.e.* balancing] constraints on the leading state's security policy become largely inoperative". According to this logic, then, other states will not challenge the hegemon's ascendancy once the disparity of power is great enough, leaving the hegemon considerable discretion when it comes to pursuing its preferences. A related point is that balancing behaviour is less likely to take place towards a relatively *benevolent* as opposed to *predatory* hegemon:

> [A] predatory hegemon is one that uses its power to structure the system to its own advantage and extract rents, whereas a benevolent hegemon is one who fosters a […] system that benefits other states to a similar or greater degree than the hegemon (Brooks 2012, 29).

Such benignity can feasibly take different forms in different domains: for instance, "foster[ing] a global economic system that benefits other states to a similar or greater degree than the hegemon" (*ibid*., 29), or refraining from unilateralism in security policies (*ibid*., 31–32). Also relevant is "how […] [the incumbent hegemon] compares with the leading alternative leader of the global system – the 'hegemonic reference point'" (*ibid*., 36).

3.1.3 Converging around concentration(s) of power and coercion

Despite their quarrels, for the above-described accounts, hegemony is first and foremost about the concentration of a disproportionate amount of power capabilities in the hands of one state. The ability to exert influence, whether through military dominance, the use of economic power, or co-optation via public good provision, is ultimately assumed to flow – rather unproblematically one might add – from superior endowments of power and the quality of said capabilities held by the hegemon (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 22; see also Lee 2010, 7–8). As Robert Gilpin (1981, 34) posits, while the espousal of certain widely shared norms or values may be

[16] Robert Gilpin (1981, 194) himself once captured this logic thus: "[r]etrenchment by its very nature is an indication of relative weakness and declining power, and thus retrenchment can have a deteriorating effect on relations with allies and rivals".

conducive to the hegemon's "right to rule", these factors are ultimately undergirded, even overshadowed, by a "demonstrated ability to enforce its will on other states".

The variations on the theme discussed so far do not, however, provide much guidance when it comes to the inherent complexity of turning a hegemon's exorbitant material capabilities into actual influence, at least not beyond the fact that a hegemon's political leadership should pursue strategies that are privy to how states "really behave" in an anarchical environment. However, contemporary realists cannot even agree on what this fundamental premise entails. They are a broad church, as evinced by the rift between defensive and offensive realism, as well as the incongruent policy prescriptions put forth in the offshore balancing/restraint versus deep engagement debate.

All this begs reference to Robert O. Keohane's (1984, 34–35) distinction between a "basic force model" and "force activation model" of hegemony, where, in the former, "outcomes reflect the tangible capabilities of actors" and, in the latter "[d]ecisions to exercise leadership are necessary to 'activate' the posited relationship between power capabilities and outcomes". Such decisions must, by definition, be made within the hegemonic state. There is thus a need to move beyond the material image to the intrinsic attributes of the hegemon. Before proceeding, however, it pays to stress that although the lion's share of the exposition that follows will focus on the intrinsic and socio-institutional attributes of hegemony, this does not mean that the concept should ever be *entirely* dissociated from its material scaffolds. It is merely suggested that appreciating the complex workings of hegemony necessitates concerted attention to both unit-level attributes of the hegemon and the social nature of the international arena.

3.2 The intrinsic image of hegemony

This section shifts gears by inquiring into the intrinsic attributes of hegemony. Such a broadening of the concept's remit takes the discussion some way towards a *less structurally deterministic* and *more dynamic* formulation. It is argued that domestic factors, and especially *ideational* ones, can provide vital additional insights on how the hegemon conducts itself on the international arena.

3.2.1 Hegemonic will and ambition

It is entirely possible to move beyond the material image without severing the link between hegemony, power capabilities and (the ever-present latent potential of) coercion. Christopher Layne's (2006a, 4) account is illustrative here. He initially assumes a similar starting point to Gilpin (1981) and Mearsheimer (2001). Hegemony is, first and foremost, about "raw, hard power" and "economic

supremacy". In other words, its foundations remain firmly in the realm of material capabilities, of which the hegemon again possesses, relatively speaking, such an amount that no other state can challenge its position of supremacy. Hegemony is, once again, grounded upon the distribution of said *capabilities*, and the hegemon is the most powerful state in an international system, which is characterised by a *unipolar* power structure (Layne 2006a, 4).

However, Layne (*ibid*.) adds two other essential features of hegemony, ones that are not directly attributable to either the possession or distribution of material capabilities, and instead refer back to *domestic-level* attributes. On the one hand, he argues, a hegemonic state must possess *ambition*, which orients it towards hegemonic purposes. This means that the hegemon uses its disproportionate power to achieve defined goals, the most central of which is the maintenance of an international *order* that is, first and foremost, beneficial for the hegemon, serves its self-interest. On the other hand, the hegemon must possess the *will* to use its power, and do so in a manner that serves this ambitious goal of order maintenance.

Kori Schake (2017, 26) echoes the same points. In her understanding, hegemony entails the "ability to set the rules of international order", of which military strength is a "necessary condition". Other material trappings, mainly in the economic domain, remain useful supplements, as do further attributes, like culture. At the end of the day, though, "the prerequisites of hegemony are the *willingness* and ability to impose and enforce order, and no amount of power or wealth can serve as a substitute" (*ibid*.; emphasis added). Hegemony can only be achieved if the leader undertakes "an active attempt to create and sustain a set of rules" (Fettweis 2017, 432). A theorist of hegemony should, then, endeavour to crack open the proverbial black box of the hegemonic state.

3.2.2 Hegemony and the levels of analysis

Ever since Kenneth Waltz (2001) famously grappled with the causes of war in terms of three images – "human behaviour", "the internal structure of states" and "international anarchy" – theorists of the international arena have appreciated that their models for explaining and understanding international phenomena need to invariably grapple with "the level of social organization which the observer selects as his point of entry into any study of the subject" (Singer 1960, 453). At the epicentre of this "levels-of-analysis problem" is the perennial question of whether units themselves or the systems wherein they are embedded drive the action of said units (Hollis and Smith 1990, 7–9). The pragmatic solution, adopted herein, is that research design drives the selection of which level(s), or linkages between levels, a researcher focuses on. The levels-of-analysis edifice is thus best seen as a

"methodological tool" for making sense of a complex world, not a rigid "ontological postulate" (Temby 2015).

For purposes of distilling the intrinsic drivers of US hegemony, at least three levels, and their potential interplay, appear worthy of note: the *leadership*, the *policy elites* (replete with the bureaucracies and organisations, formal and informal, within which they function) and the *broader public sphere*. Here recent scholarship has drawn attention to various potential components relevant to hegemonic will and ambition.

An obvious first candidate is the nature and quality of foreign policy leadership. In the US political system, focus on the competence of the president is warranted for the obvious reason that the executive enjoys considerable discretion in the conduct of international affairs (Binder, Goldgeier and Saunders 2020; Goldgeier and Saunders 2018). Nye (2006, 143–44), for instance, distils six capabilities that are important for a president's ability to lead. The president needs to articulate a "policy vision" that is both appealing and realisable, possess the "emotional intelligence" necessary to inspire followership, and harness the ability to communicate ideas to relevant audiences. A leader's "organizational capacity" refers to the aptitude to sift through information and solicit sound advice for policy decisions, "political skill" to the ability to get one's way within the relevant institutional settings, and "contextual intelligence" to adaptability in the face of fast-paced events.

Other authors deem "manag[ing] a coalition of elites" on matters of foreign policy pertinent, especially when it comes to the ability of the president to shape public opinion on pivotal foreign policy issues like the use of force (Saunders 2015). Similarly, it seems that the balance of experience between the president, on the one hand, and his coterie of advisors, on the other, on key international issues can play a role in the ability and willingness of the White House incumbent to monitor advisors, delegate to them, and assess competing viewpoints (Saunders 2018). Trubowitz and Harris (2019, 621), in turn, call for attention to "usable power", the "domestic political capacity to translate […] power assets into international influence". To harness such power, America's political leadership (particularly the president) needs to find a way to obtain the support of the legislative branch for their policies, narrate a compelling and broadly appealing foreign policy vision for the country, and construct a social contract that is fit for the current times. For the authors, the apparent inability to do so risks rendering US foreign policy increasingly ineffective (*ibid*., 637–639).

The domestic political institutions within which the hegemon's elites "reside" thus act as a vital support structure for US hegemony, one that appears to be fraying. Recent analyses paint a worrying picture of intensifying "hyper-partisanship" or "political polarisation" in Washington D.C. as key impediments for effective

American foreign policy,[17] and, one can deduce, for the maintenance of a hegemonic global role (Trubowitz and Harris 2019; Schultz 2017). Of course, on the level of formal institutional structures, wrangling between the Congress and White House on foreign policy matters is by no means novel – the Constitution actually sets up the two branches of government into inherent tension.[18] The current situation, however, exacerbates such frictions. It has been argued that increased partisanship bears implications for the ability of the executive to harness legislative support for its foreign policy initiatives (especially bold ones), for the propensity of leaders to draw lessons from policy mistakes, as well as for Congress's potential to act as a check on the (possibly) disruptive policies pursued by the White House (Schultz 2017; Goldgeier and Saunders 2018).

Beyond formal institutions, polarisation has certainly also had an impact on the functioning of informal institutions, especially the American party-political system. Here Musgrave (2019b, 462–63) draws attention to the fragility of the domestic consensus on America's hegemonic role in the face of intra- and inter-party competition – the very fora where the everyday jostling over political advantage in a democracy takes place. Party-political wrangling may thus engender

> contests about the content of national identity yoked to partisan political processes; outbidding among aspirants for office-wooing allies in intracoalitional disputes; spoiling, in which an opposition party withholds support for policies to tarnish the incumbent party's reputation; promulgating identities at odds with the policies of hegemony; and designing policies to cater to the most influential members of a party's base rather than to the median voter. Such patterns mitigate against the sort of broad-based compromises or long-range planning that advocates for stable hegemonic orders pine for. (Musgrave 2019b, 454)

In effect, then, as ideological overlap between the parties has dissipated and the political centre has withered away in the process, it is reasonable to expect more

[17] Polarisation can be treated as an umbrella term for interrelated phenomena, including increasing divergence in the views of political elites along party-political lines, a similar dynamic in the ranks of the voting public, the resulting entrenchment of distrust in people holding different political views, and the division of the media environment into ideological silos (Schultz 2017, 8–9).

[18] For a useful and accessible overview of such dynamics see Kronlund (2018). Beyond constitutional provisos, of course, lawmakers and the president have divergent incentive structures *vis-à-vis* the international arena by virtue of the positions they hold in the political structure, while they also answer to different constituencies at home (Tama 2019, 3–4).

violent swings in foreign policy as power changes hands from one party to another (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2010).

Of course, the perils of polarisation reach beyond Washington D.C. and the American two-party system. There has been much rather inconclusive debate on how the American public thinks about foreign policy matters, and international engagement in particular, as well as the role that polarisation plays in driving these dynamics. In seminal pieces, Drezner (2008) finds that the American public is more realist in orientation than the conventional wisdom suggests, while Kupchan and Trubowitz (2010) note that not only have the views of Democrat and Republican supporters on policy issues diverged, support for isolationism has also increased. Chaudoin, Milner and Tingley (2010) disagree, and argue that such divergence has not, in fact, occurred and that American public opinion remains broadly (liberal-) internationalist. In fairness to the authors, much of their quarrel is about the selection of indicators and conceptual matters in their respective studies, particularly over the meanings of polarisation and liberal internationalism.

Recent opinion poll data provides a similarly muddied picture in this regard. For instance, the most recent *Chicago Council on Global Affairs* survey puts figures for "tak[ing] an active part in world affairs" and "staying out" at 69 and 30 per cent, respectively (Smeltz *et al*. 2019), while a *Pew Research Center* study shows opinions on whether the US "should be active in global affairs" or "pay less attention to overseas problems" as almost evenly divided (Doherty, Kiley and Asheer 2019).[19] However, both surveys point to partisan divergence on manifold issues like paying attention to concerns of allies, building up of military strength, restrictions on international trade, immigration, climate change, and the threat posed by China's rise. Republicans tend to be more hawkish, less accommodating when it comes to the views of allies and more concerned about external diffusions into the country, whether in the form of tangibles or people (see also R. Y. Shapiro 2018). Busby and Monten's (2018) studies underline that the public's apparent internationalism is tempered by the low salience of foreign policy issues – lending outsized roles to vocal minorities – while political elites actually tend to underestimate the public's support for internationalism. On the elite level, they find partisan divisions to persist when it comes to questions of sovereignty, freedom of action and international cooperation. Here, too, it is Democrats who tend to support a more globally engaged approach that potentially constrains America's unilateral room for manoeuvre.

What remains clear, however, is that Donald Trump's election victory was, at least in part, driven by public disenchantment with the negative externalities of globalisation and the (liberal-)internationalist approach that has been central for the

[19] The most recent figures are 53 and 46 per cent, respectively.

building of the US-led hegemonic order after the Second World War. Randall Schweller (2018a; 2018b; 2018c), a rare IR academic voice who has unapologetically written in support of Donald Trump's inclinations and policies, argues that the White House incumbent has correctly diagnosed *both* the American public's disenchantment with the liberal international order *and* the decline in America's relative power after the global financial crisis of 2007/8. In his view, Trump has likewise proposed the right corrective by embracing a realist foreign policy that challenges the core tenets of America's liberal-hegemonic foreign policy consensus and is thus more sustainable both in terms of structural imperatives on the international arena and increasingly nationalist domestic pressures (see also Section 4.4 and Original Publication IV). This, of course, is debatable. Charles Kupchan (2018) places Trump's approach to the world squarely in a past that will never return, an unrealistic harkening back to a more homogenous Anglo-American, Christian and aloof America, a pining that may in fact worsen, not improve, the economic woes of Trump's base voters. Carla Norrlof (2018) agrees. For her, the "white America First" message of Trump, particularly resonant amongst non-college educated white voters, poses the greatest threat to America's liberal-hegemonic global engagement.

3.2.3 Embedded actors and hegemonic ideas

While all the above factors are pertinent to note when it comes to the intrinsic foundations of US hegemony, in the current study the focus is predominantly on the domestic *ideational* drivers of hegemony, particularly how more or less broadly shared (but nevertheless potentially competing) ideas regarding America's global engagement serve to inform its hegemonic role. In fact, as Henry R. Nau (2012, 8–9) argues, all the above-described factors "work to a considerable extent through the medium of intellectual ideas and debate", whether this be officials "testing ideas against practical realities", state bureaucracies espousing certain "intellectual orientations", shrewd partisans motivated by ideologies selling their ideas to constituents, or "media discourse" influencing the body politic on questions of foreign policy. Ideas about global engagement and, by implication, about hegemony thus feasibly populate all three above-described levels of social organisation within the US: the leadership, policy elites and the public sphere. In this vein, a focus on the ideational serves to illuminate how different levels of analysis can possibly interact in the ultimate formulation of a hegemonic vision and thus tell a story about the hegemon's will and ambition.

Ideas held *by* and *within* social groups have been given many names in the extant IR literature: some speak of collective ideas (Legro 2000), others focus on (strategic) cultures (Dueck 2006; Johnston 1995; Tsygankov 2014), worldviews (Nau 2012) and ideologies (Nau 2011), yet others on norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998;

Björkdahl 2002) and identities (Barnett 1999; Wendt 1999). Vitally, any such notions, though shared, are neither uniformly held in society nor monolithic in the sense that they could not be contested, reimagined, reframed, or even cast aside altogether. Tsygankov (2014, 22) usefully elaborates on this *constructivist* understanding in terms of the three levels discussed above:

> First, they [ideas] exist among three distinct and mutually interrelated groups – leadership, the political elite, and larger society – each with their own attitude and internal structure or institutions. These groups can be relatively independent; they move, adapt to changes, and react to external ideas with various speeds and intensities. Second, even when ideas cut across the elites' and society's levels and represent some larger patterns of discursive agreement, the discourse incorporates both hegemonic and recessive trends, rather than being able to form an ultimate unity. For example, national discourse can be viewed as competition of globally and nationally oriented visions, in which Globalists support cooperation in world politics, whereas Nationalists emphasize national interests and the struggle for power.

The ideas held by relevant decisionmakers do not, then, appear in their mind out of thin air, they reside in social spheres. For present purposes, policymakers, even disruptive ones, can thus be fathomed as *embedded actors* (Katzenstein 2013; Barnett 1999), they are concurrently immersed in manifold social structures that permeate different levels of analysis – domestic society, elite networks, even the international arena.[20] This is to say that leaders inevitably come into their policymaking roles with cultural baggage that they rarely, if ever, check at the door (Houghton 2007, 32). Leaders are, "as much a member of the social cognitive structure that characterizes […] society as any average citizen" (Hopf 2002, 37). Thus understood, leaders are not merely rational agents maximising utility in strategic interactions against the background of constraints imposed by the institutional arenas within which they function, they are situated within a socio-institutional environment replete with rules, norms and history-bounded practices that set the standards of what is proper and the fathomable. March and Olsen (1998, 949–54) capture this difference with their famous distinction between two logics of action, the *logic of expected consequences* and *logic of appropriateness*. The former refers to action by rational agents with pregiven interests who seek to maximise their

[20] This insight can feasibly be reformulated to fit the social understanding of the international arena laid out in Section 3.3.1 (esp. n. 27) below: "an agent-structure problem exists at every level of analysis" (Temby 2015, 722).

utility in the presence of external constraints. The latter pertains to action that is conditioned by norm-following, in other words, essential for an actor's "conception of [the] self" – her identity – or alternatively deemed virtuous within a particular social context (*ibid*., 951).

Embedded actors should be seen "as socially knowledgeable and discursively competent […] subject to constraints that are in part material, in part institutional" (Ruggie 1998, 879). They thus have the possibility to utilise the cultural and institutional settings within which they are immersed to pursue goals. This means that such agents, although immersed in social structures, are not mere unwitting "dupes" devoid of an ability to be reflective regarding the possibilities and constraints of their position within said structures. In other words, they can partake in contestation over what the normative building blocks of the structures within which they are immersed should be, and such contestation can be motivated by instrumental (logic of consequences) as well as normative (logic of appropriateness) considerations. Most relevant of all, embedded actors can attempt to refashion components of their social spheres as a way to render their policies – and ultimately the outcomes of such policies – more legitimate (Barnett 1999, 6–7).

All this, of course, is not to say that such change to the normative building blocks of social structures is easy to exact. While they can be altered, entrenched collective ideas (whether these be conceptualised as norms, cultures or even identities) tend to be resistant to change, they are "persistent (or 'sticky'); institutions arise through patterns of shared understandings, but they are slow to alter; and structures, though mutable, are resistant to reconstruction" (Brunnée and Toope 2000, 33). This kind of "stickiness" of ideational factors breeds predictability into our social world(s). However, the role of ideational factors in regular and extraordinary times differs profoundly – they are both producers of stasis and tools that can potentially be harnessed for change:

> In times of relative stability and continuity, strategic ideas have an impact primarily through their institutionalisation or entrenchment in positions of power, both formal and informal. In the wake of international shocks, ideas still have a great impact, but in a very different way: through the process of agenda-setting. While a variety of political actors can play a role in the early stages of agenda-setting, leading state officials are the key figures in this process. In concrete terms, it is only through the advocacy of such officials that new ideas can have an impact on strategic outcomes. (Dueck 2004, 523)

Successful alteration of predominant ideas may thus necessitate a profound "external shock" or "crisis": "*an extraordinary moment when the existence and viability of the*

political order are called into question […] [c]onflict […] has risen to the point that the interests, institutions and shared identities that undergird the political system are put in jeopardy" (Ikenberry 2008, 3, emphasis in original). However, such a rupture is only a part of the story. Concerted and crafty political entrepreneurship by skilled agents of change is also vital. To consolidate novel ideas, actors must be willing to frame them in appealing ways, all the while overcoming coordination and collective action problems as well as resistance from proponents of the old orthodoxy (see only Legro 2000; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Checkel 1993; Risse and Sikkink 1999; Bloomfield 2016).[21]

3.2.4 Bridging the intrinsic and material images

A recent strand of realist IR scholarship, called *neoclassical realism*, has begun to grapple with the linkages between materialist and intrinsic images of hegemony, stressing the role of ideas – and especially *ideas held by the foreign policy elites* – regarding America's "hegemonness". This illustrates that a fundamentally *realist* case can also be made for paying attention to the ideational aspects of foreign policy (or grand strategy) of a hegemonic state. Neoclassical realists emphasise the "indirect and complex" linkage between material power capabilities and the foreign policy of states. While the former are still perceived as key drivers of a state's international conduct, unit-level variables intervene when it comes to translating

[21] It pays to note that "the existence of crisis is relative not absolute" (Lebow 1981, 9). Whether a situation qualifies as a crisis is, at the most basic level, a subjective assessment and experience on the part of those engaging in crisis talk. The rhetorical construction of the kinds of crises pertinent for the present study is usually undertaken by those in positions of political leadership, foreign policy pundits as well as representatives of the media. To speak of crisis is to underline urgency, the need for "immediate action" in the face of "terminal endings, such as death, collapse, demise, disempowerment, or decline into irrelevance" (Reus-Smit 2007, 166).

systemic imperatives into actual policy – the classical side of their equation (Rose 1998, 146–47).[22]

This is particularly relevant when grappling with a hegemonic state. In fact, a key insight of neoclassical realists, already alluded to above, is that profound asymmetry in material power creates a situation where the constraints imposed by the international structure on the most powerful state are considerably looser. Coincidentally, the horizon of feasible actions and achievable policy aims is broader than for other states in the system. Hegemons thus have a propensity for "visionary world-making"; no longer fearing for their survival or security, "interests offer few constraints to check the progress of grand ideas in the policymaking process" (Kitchen 2010, 141). In the case of the United States, then, "[i]noperative systemic constraints mean that […] foreign policy is a realm of choice rather than necessity" (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 19). To understand the nature of these choices, it is essential to pry deeper into the realm of ideas.

Christopher Layne's (2006a, 8) *extraregional hegemony theory* is a useful starting point. He starts from the premise that America's hegemonic pursuits flow from "the causal linkages between the distribution of power in the international system and intervening domestic variables" (*ibid*., 8). For him, the core domestic factor driving America's hegemonic foreign policy has been a commitment to the "open door", a conscious project by American leaders "to create an […] international system or 'world order,' made up of states that are open and subscribe to the United States' liberal values and institutions and that are open to U.S. economic penetration" (*ibid*., 30). From this vantage point, the key drivers behind US hegemony have been particular ideas held by domestic elites: a widespread

[22] In a recent article, Kirshner (2012, 57) describes *classical* realist insights thus: "Classical realists tend to envision states, in the abstract, as essentially rational, purposeful, and motivated, but they do not see states as hyper-rationalist automatons. Rather classical realists also understand that state behavior is shaped by the lessons of history (right or wrong), ideas (accurate or not), ideology (good or bad), and that states make choices influenced by fear, vulnerability, and hubris, usually in the context of considerable uncertainty. This may not result in an elegant theory, but it does offer a disciplined and general approach to the study of world politics and a guide to statecraft." The key difference between classical and neoclassical realism, according to proponents of the latter, then, is that neoclassical realism places more emphasis on systemic constraints than its classical forebears, and is methodologically more "sophisticated" (Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman 2009, 17). In William Wohlforth's (2008) assessment, classical realism should not even be thought of as a "subschool" of contemporary IR realism at all, it is simply the whole realist tradition prior to the publication of Waltz's (1979) *Theory of International Politics*, stretching for millennia from Thucydides through Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes and Carl von Clausewitz all the way to E.H.Carr and Hans Morgenthau.

perception on the part of policymakers that domestic prosperity – and domestic peace – are best served by an open economic order that creates markets for US goods, potential for investment, and access to raw materials. Such an order, also, would not only secure American interests, but also the hegemon's values – the longevity of the US domestic political system, the very foundations of the American Creed (*ibid*., 32). In his later work, Layne (2017) reiterates the remarkable constancy of the foreign policy elite's worldview and concomitant foreign policy discourse, or more aptly "discursive dominance", as key drivers behind the US espousal of hegemony on a broad scale. Ever since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, according to his assessment, "the foreign policy establishment's world view" has contained four central tenets, namely: "the primacy of national security, the imperative of American leadership, the importance of an open international economy, and the need to export America's liberal political ideas" (*ibid*., 267).

Stephen M. Walt (2018a) – although he is not strictly-speaking a neoclassical realist – provides another prominent assessment on the outsized role of the "foreign policy community" and the prevalence of its ideas in American foreign policy. He argues that this community consists of "individuals and organisations that actively engage on a regular basis with issues of international affairs" (*ibid*., 95). In other words, it encompasses government bureaucracies, the think tank scene and other organisations committed to foreign affairs, interest groups and lobbies, the media, as well as academia. For Walt (*ibid*., 133–80), the commitment of the foreign policy community to "liberal hegemony" has led the US astray in a manner that does not, again, reflect the less internationalist inclinations of the American public. More insidiously still, this community has used various strategies – overexaggerating threats that would flow from a less activist foreign policy, misconstruing the advantages of liberal hegemony and downplaying the costs of maintaining this approach – to sell its policy dogmas in a "marketplace of ideas [that] is rigged" (*ibid*., 139). While other ideas may exist, including offshore balancing put forth by Walt and some of his realist brethren (see Section 3.1.2 above), the deck is stacked against them.

Others paint a more conflicted picture of the intrinsic ideational drivers of US hegemony. Colin Dueck (2006, 34–36) attributes America's choices of grand strategy – and, feasibly, approach(es) it has chosen to respond to the systemic imperatives of its hegemonic position (cf. *ibid*., 124–27) – to an interplay between international factors, American strategic culture, domestic politics and leadership. Dueck (*ibid*., 41–42) links up the adoption of ideas by the policymaking elite and, ultimately, the executive, to a *life cycle* model of strategic adjustment. In short, changes in the guiding ideas of foreign policy – or grand strategy – tend to take place during "international shocks" or as a result of "electoral turnover". Such events

create the necessary space for different policy ideas to take root through advocacy by agenda-setting actors. This entails two stages, where committed idea entrepreneurs first manage to bring their preferred alternatives to the attention of key foreign policy makers and, secondly, the executive branch (often the president herself) then introduces these ideas to the legislature and into the public domain. The process also necessitates that the proposed ideas fit, to an extent at least, with the prevalent international and domestic conditions (feasibly both material and ideational). Moreover, the most resonant ideas, the ones that stick, tend to be "consistent with the nation's strategic culture" (*ibid.*, 41). That is to say, such notions are in line with the "interlocking set of values and beliefs held by the politically interested people of each nation-state that relate to strategic affairs" (*ibid.*, 15).

The last point is key. Although the marketplace of potential ideas to guide global engagement is broad in a democracy like the United States, Dueck (2006) posits that US international engagement has been plagued by two contradicting cultural legacies: "liberal assumptions" and "limited liability". Upon closer inspection these appear congruent to the two traditions of American exceptionalism explored above, and thus constitute building blocks of America's identity as an international actor. The former, again, pulls the US towards "idealistic, expansive and global" policies, while the latter limits the amount of sacrifice the US is willing to make to achieve its objectives (*ibid.*, 4–5). The hegemon thus becomes a "reluctant crusader", its international engagement rife with contradictions.[23] Dueck (*ibid.*, 31–33) also argues for the existence of distinguishable "strategic subcultures", which he calls "internationalists", "nationalists", "progressives" and "realists". These are essentially competing schools of American foreign policy thought that possess different levels of commitment to both liberalism and limited liability. In short, the internationalists are most prone to expend resources to spread America's liberal creed to the world and the nationalists are least willing to do so, with progressives

[23] Stephen Sestanovich (2014) makes a similar argument regarding the cyclicality of America's global engagement. He maintains that US foreign policy has ebbed and flowed between "maximalist" and "retrenchment" phases, an incessant oscillation of administrations that seek to do too much in the world – to "overcommit" – followed by course corrections that then tend to go too far in the other direction.

and realists falling somewhere in between (*ibid.*).[24] An alternative and updated typology of schools of foreign policy thought drawing upon the current state of play in the US – one encompassing liberal internationalism, neoconservatism, realism and neo-isolationism – will be put forth by the present author in Original Publication IV (see also Section 4.4) to unearth American global engagement in the 21st century, in general, and Donald Trump's foreign policy approach, in particular.

At this stage it suffices to underline that such posited, potentially competing and to some extent overlapping traditions are but collections of ideas that are held by more or less cohesive social groups regarding: (a) what kind of an international actor the United States is (or should be) and, by virtue of being such an actor, (b) what goals it should pursue on the international arena and how it should endeavour to do so. In this sense, these traditions straddle the (conceptual) space between national identity and national interests. They reiterate and reimagine *both* what America *is* and what America *wants* and *needs* (see Figure 1). Although all such categorisations are admittedly *ideal-typical* categories in the Weberian sense – simplifications or even reifications made by scholars in order to better capture the inherent complexity of a world full of different ideas (see Forsberg 2011, 1199) – appreciating the existence of competing schools of thought in US foreign policy discourse brings forth the contested nature of America's being and acting in the world. This acknowledgment also, most crucially, underlines the potential for change. Even if a particular strand of thinking has been dominant for decades, as for instance Walt (2018a), Layne (2017) or Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) would have it, this does not mean it needs to be so *ad infinitum*. In spite of their potential for becoming entrenched, *both* states' national identities *and* national interests are concepts open

[24] Of course, there are various other ways to typologise such categories, even though the focus above has been predominantly upon those presented by neoclassical realists. Posen and Ross (1996, 5), for instance, speak of four "competing grand strategy visions" – "relatively discrete and coherent arguments about the U.S. role in the world [that] compete in […] public discourse" – naming them "neo-isolationism", "selective engagement", "cooperative security" and "primacy", respectively. Henry R. Nau (2002, 43–59) argues that there are four "foreign policy traditions", connoting "neoisolationist/nationalist America", "realist America", "primacist America" and "internationalist America". Daniel S. Hamilton (2016), in contrast, follows Walter Russel Mead's (2002) distinction between "Wilsonians", "Hamiltonians", "Jeffersonians" and "Jacksonians". The *first school* is marked by commitment to missionary exceptionalism, anti-colonialism and the fostering of international peace, *the second* connotes interest-based internationalism of the great-power realist variety, *the third* pertains to an exemplary brand of exceptionalism that makes allowances for beneficial international trade, and *the fourth* is populist in inclination, committed to defending US sovereignty from external incursions, also in the economic domain (Hamilton 2016, 128–133).

to contestation (Barnett 1999, 9–10; Wendt 1999, 230–31; Layne 2017, 266–67; see Section 3.3.1 below).

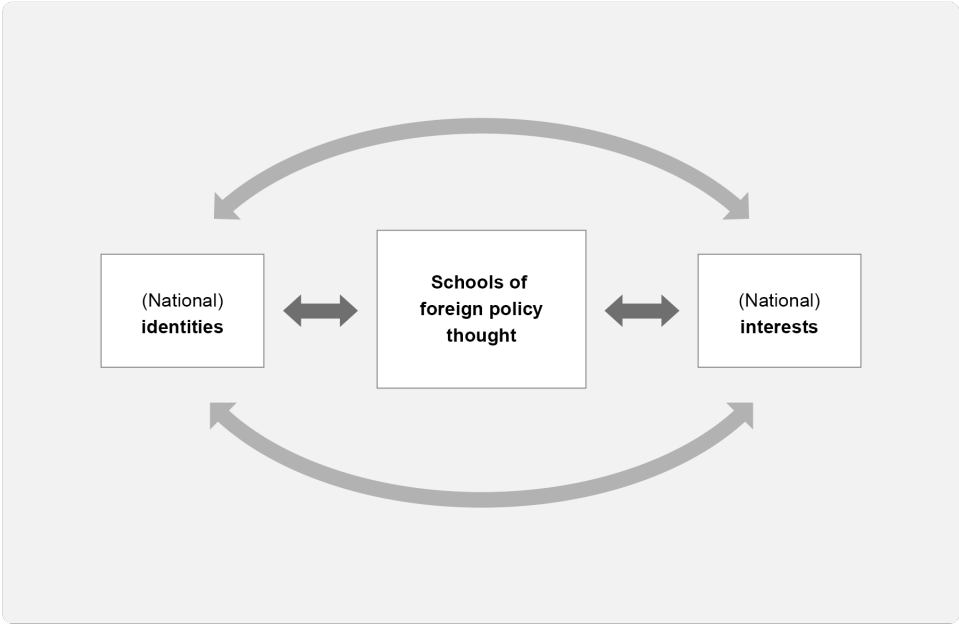

Figure 1: Identities, interests and schools of foreign policy thought[25]

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The above discussion has sought to illustrate that the intricacies of strategic adjustment or foreign policy change should not be directly deduced from shifts in the distribution of capabilities on the systemic level. Both ambition and will appear to be attributes that are *intrinsic* to the hegemon, they cannot be understood without attention to domestic institutional structures, domestic actors with political power, and (particularly relevant for present purposes) ideas held within the hegemonic state regarding its international engagement. Especially pertinent in this regard are actors who are in position to authoritatively articulate and implement foreign policy, namely the foreign policy elites. In fact, all the original publications of the current exposition share, with the neoclassical realist accounts laid out above, a focus on *policy ideas held by the leaderships and/or elites*, whether these be narrated visions

[25] © Sari Kaija, Virran Varrelta Design Oy

of order, ideas regarding the trustworthiness of other states' leaderships and elites, values in foreign policy discourse or competing schools of foreign policy thought.

However, it is crucial to remember that while domestic ideational building blocks of hegemony are important, they too tell an impartial story. The nurturing of hegemony is a complex "multi-level game" that spans both the domestic and the international arenas (cf. Putnam 1988; Moravcsik 1993), which means that "hegemonic strategies and practices must be sustainable at both [domestic and international] levels of analysis" (Musgrave 2019b, 454). At this stage, it is essential to engage in a more nuanced discussion of the latter.

3.3 The socio-institutional image of hegemony

At the end of the day, the above-described accounts stressing the intrinsic properties of a hegemon, although more nuanced than approaches fixated on the fluctuation of material capabilities, appear insufficiently privy to the social element in international politics. They stress the role of systemic factors in conjunction with domestic ones, but they do not necessarily embrace a *social* conception of international order and, by implication, a social understanding of the formation of a hegemonic state's identity and interests within an international *society*. To move the discussion forward, a third, what shall henceforth be called *socio-institutional* understanding of hegemony, must therefore be distilled from the relevant literature. Such a social approach not only paints a more complex picture of how hegemony becomes manifest and is maintained, but also has implications when analysing the exercise of hegemonic power. However, before it is possible to dwell on these debates further, it is crucial to present a short synopsis of what is meant by a social understanding of the international arena in the present context.

3.3.1 The international arena as a social realm

To borrow David A. Lake's (2013, 560) assessment, a "social theory of international relations" necessitates attention to three core components: it must be (i) relational, (ii) intersubjective and (iii) ideational. The *first* component of *relationality* implies that "the relevant attributes" of international actors can only be understood with

reference to, or in relationship with, other actors (*ibid*., 560).[26] For instance, in the present context, to speak of the United States as a hegemon implies that within the international system there are other states who must make up the category of followers, secondary powers, middle powers, small states *et cetera* (cf. Hopf 2002, 7). This acknowledgement opens up avenues for considering not just the power attributes of the hegemon as imperative for making sense of the international arena, it actually lends a modicum of agency to the follower states. "[A] hegemon's power and influence is […] very much contingent on the policies of other states" (Jesse *et al*. 2012, 11), it depends upon the strategies that followers adopt to either challenge or support the leading state and the broader international order. In fact, recent scholarship has begun to mine how smaller states can, for instance, play a hegemon and aspiring hegemonic challenger(s) against each other, substituting goods provided by the incumbent with goods provided by the challenger(s), or perhaps use such an approach to extract a more favourable "deal" from the incumbent (Cooley and Nexon 2020; Cooley *et al*. 2015).

S*econdly,* the relevant attributes of actors assume meaning *intersubjectively* – through "shared understandings, expectations, and social knowledge" (Wendt 1994, 389). As will be elaborated in due course, attributes like authority, legitimacy or trustworthiness, all of which could feasibly be associated with hegemonic states, should be understood as inherently social characteristics, specific to broader social structures and the relationships that exist within them.[27] As such, these qualities are

[26] Arguably, this understanding of agents assuming positions within a structure in relation to other actors transcends many a theoretical fault line in the IR discipline (see *e.g.* P. T. Jackson and Nexon 2019), although the assumption itself often goes unarticulated. In fact, approaches as different as structural realism, the English School, neo-Gramscian studies in International Political Economy and social constructivism are all privy to the variegated positions that actors assume within systems, structures or societies, whether these be the mantle of great, middle or small powers defined in terms of power capabilities, potentially exploitative relations of super- and subordination, or socially constructed roles and identities (Barnett and Duvall 2005; cf. only Waltz 1979; Cox 1996; Wendt 1999).

[27] To posit that the international arena is a social realm means that the theorist strikes a middle ground position on the agent-structure problem, she appreciates the co-constitutive relationship that pertains between actors and the structures wherein they are embedded. To put it differently, space- and time-contingent social structures – conceptualised variously in the literature as cultures, or constellations of values, rules, principles, norms and practices – act as constraints on the action of human and corporate agents, but the said structures can also be "(re)created" by that very action (Ruggie 1998, 876; Wendt 1987, 356). In fact, the common denominator, and most vital insight, of adherents of the so-called social constructivist paradigm for the study of international politics is that "people *and* societies construct, or constitute, each other" (Onuf 1989, 36; emphasis in original). Put differently, structures have both *causal* and *constitutive* effects on actors (Wendt 1999, 25–27).

not objectively "possessed" by actors, they necessitate "mutual recognition" (Lake 2013, 560; see also Reus-Smit 2007). In addition, such recognition can only be attained through the manifold relationships and interactions that are constitutive of the social structures of the international realm.

Thirdly, as a social *milieu*, the world outside our minds and all the material attributes it consists of is "mediated" or "constituted" by *ideas* (Lake 2013, 560; Houghton 2007, 29). As already argued, ideas – variously conceptualised under the rubrics of values, rules, principles, norms, beliefs or cultures in the extant IR literature – have bearing upon how actors perceive their (social) environment, formulate their preferences and interests, and harness capabilities to achieve policy objectives (see *e.g.* Finnemore 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; 2002; Barnett 1999; Wendt 1999; Hurrell 2002; Legro 2000; Tsygankov 2014). Relatedly, any social account of the international arena appreciates that states' interests and identities are not etched in stone, they should be fathomed as particular types of potentially malleable ideas. Interests are merely "beliefs about how to meet needs" (Wendt 1999, 130; see also Nau 2002, 16–25). This means that "the national interest [...] is constructed, is created as a meaningful object, out of shared meanings through which the world, particularly the international system and the place of the state in it, is understood" (Weldes 1996, 277). In addition, social constructivist students of the international have long maintained that in order to make sense of their needs, and to act in the world, actors – whether individuals or states – must first be aware of *who they are*: "[i]t is only as some-one that we can want some-thing, and it is only once we know who we are that we can know what we want" (Ringmar 1996, 13; see also Wendt 1999, 231). There is thus a co-constitutive link that pertains between an actor's *interests* and her *identity* (Hopf 1998, 175–76; Ruggie 1998, 862–864; see also Figure 1 and Section 2.1 above).

These acknowledgements also have particular relevance when considering the role of material factors, especially states' power capabilities. In a social understanding of the international, such attributes are only rendered relevant via "human cognition and social interaction" (Finnemore 1996, 6). In fact, a pertinent critique of structural realism is that a capabilities-based approach to power "overlook[s] the extent to which power is a matter of perception" (Schmidt 2005, 542). As Peter van Ham (2010, 3; emphasis added) has argued, "[p]ower […] comprises a dual ontology: one based on *social interaction*, and one as an *essential condition and resource*". In the former interpretation, power only comes to have meaning "in and through social relations" (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 42; see also Reus-Smit 2004a, 55–63).[28] Thus, "[t]o understand power in international relations,

[28] For an accessible discussion on the distinction between a capabilities-based and relational understandings of power, see Baldwin (2013).

we must see it as a social relationship and place it side by side with other quintessentially social concepts such as prestige, authority and legitimacy" (Hurrell 2007, 269).

Traditional attributes of power, whether of the military, economic or technological variety, thus only come to possess meaning in and through intersubjective ideas that are held about them. As a variation on the standard example: one Iranian nuclear weapon is infinitely more threatening for the United States than any number of Israeli ones, and this is so by virtue of the broader socio-historical context within which the two inherently different dyadic relationships that the US has with these states are embedded (cf. Wendt 1999, 255). This appreciation of power as a social phenomenon is particularly vital for picking apart the intricacies of the socio-institutional image of hegemony. Before this is possible, however, a short exposition on *order*, a concept central to such formulations of hegemony, must be undertaken.

3.3.2 Order as a social construct

Order is used in the IR literature to *both* indicate a non-chaotic state of affairs and denote a macro-level institutional form (Reus-Smit 2017, 854). In the current study, order is used in the latter sense, that is to say, it is not merely a *descriptive* or *situational* concept, but instead has a prominent *normative* component (Acharya 2018, 4–12). In his seminal tome on *Anarchical Society*, Hedley Bull (1977, 4) described order as "a pattern that leads to a particular result, an arrangement of social life such that it promotes certain goals or values". In the most general sense, then, orders serve the function of escaping from the incessant spectre of disorder, of creating and maintaining a measure of stability where there previously was none. In fact, when it comes to order on any level of social organisation, whether we are concerned with domestic, regional or global arenas, the *sine qua non* appears to be the concerted pursuit this rather basic objective.

For Bull (1977, 8), international order thus entailed "a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states". These include the sustainability of international society, external sovereignty, peace and limits on violence, the honouring of promises, and the stabilisation of possession (*ibid*., 8).[29] The same ideas are reflected in other (newer) definitions of order employed in the

[29] Of course, in today's complex global environment, it is unclear to what extent the notion of international order can be uncoupled – conceptually, analytically or empirically – from global order. When it comes to the latter, nowadays a dizzying array of actors inhabit a transnational space imbued with vertical and horizontal linkages that transcend national boundaries and function both below and above the "disaggregated state" (Slaughter 2004).

IR discipline. Richard N. Haass (2019, 22), for instance, maintains that order "requires a stable distribution of power and broad acceptance of the rules that govern the conduct of international relations". G. John Ikenberry (2012, 47), in turn, equates international order with "the settled rules and arrangements that guide the relations among states". These definitions imply that international orders are, to an extent, *purposefully* created or, to borrow Dunne's (1995) term, *reflexively* constructed, to serve the above-described objectives.

This element of purpose also implies that it would be myopic to equate international *order* with prevailing material power balances or asymmetries in the international *system*. To speak of orders, it is necessary to appreciate that they, too, are ultimately *socially constructed* (Reus-Smit 2017, 854–55). They are – up to a point at least – "underpinned by an inter-subjective consensus" (Goh 2013, 7). Orders thus have a "power component" and an "identity component" (Flockhart 2016, 15). This means that the sustainability of order hinges not only upon the possession of power resources (although this is arguably a part of the story), but also on the shared values, norms, rules, institutions and practices that lend the order its requisite legitimacy and grant its custodian(s) a modicum of authority. These ideational components of order also confer a semblance of authority upon the state(s) that assume(s) leadership roles within the order (Reus-Smit 2017, 854–55; Ikenberry 2012, 82–85).

In the traditional story, the International Relations discipline has been preoccupied with solving the problem of anarchy, with how to sustain order in the absence of a leviathan and render international life into a condition where, to quote Thomas Hobbes, it is "nasty, brutish and short" no longer. This preoccupation has transcended IR's many theoretical fault-lines (cf. Waltz 1979; Wendt 1999; Bull 1977; Keohane 1984). When it comes to hegemony, at least from the standpoint of the less powerful states, the problem appears to be the opposite. Analysis moves from the *anarchy problematique* to the *hierarchy problematique*, namely how to restrain the leviathan so that it does not come to dominate the system altogether without regard for the interests of others (cf. Clark 2009b; Ikenberry 2012). Of course, this concern has also much animated the discipline of International Law, a point captured well by Anne Orford (2003, 73):

> [I]nternational lawyers focus most of our attention on analysing new ways in which international law can assist in constraining, disabling or negotiating with those who are imagined as holding power.

The role of international law, in this understanding, is to act as a check on exorbitant power within an international *order*.

In a situation of gross asymmetry in power capabilities, the question of "turning raw power into legitimate [if not legal] authority" thus becomes a central preoccupation (Ikenberry 2001, 17; see also Hurrell 2007, 269). In modern society, whether of the international or domestic kind, legitimate rule tends to be intimately tied to institutionalised rule – legitimate authority begs the establishment of regularised modes of control (Barnett and Finnemore 2005; Finnemore 2009). Unpacking these dynamics further through linking up hegemony with a social conceptualisation of international order is the key value-added of the broad church of socio-institutional approaches to the study of hegemony.

3.3.3 Socio-institutional accounts of hegemonic order

The socio-institutional accounts of hegemonic order encompass various different takes on the concept, each with their own twist on how the hegemon relates to (the norms, institutions and relationships of) the hegemonic order. However, there is sufficient overlap in these accounts to discuss them as part of the same canon, even if they approach the concept from different theoretical lenses – whether (neo)Gramscian (Cox 1996), liberal institutionalist (Ikenberry 2012), English School (Clark 2009c), social constructivist (Reus-Smit 2004a), or even poststructuralist (Nabers 2010). In particular, these approaches share a preoccupation with followers' consent, processes of institutionalisation, legitimacy, and a multi-faceted understanding of hegemonic power.

3.3.3.1 Hegemonic control and follower consent

Robert W. Cox (1996) famously tied together hegemony and a ("thin") social conception of order and international institutions in the early 1980s. He drew on Antonio Gramsci's work on the role of the bourgeoisie in European industrial states, and argued that exercising hegemony in any society necessarily "involved concessions to subordinate classes" (*ibid*., 126). These concessions would, ultimately, render the rule of the powerful sufficiently bearable so as to remove the need for coercion, save for some extraordinary cases. Abstracting this to the international level, a hegemonic state "would have to found and protect a world *order* […] which most other states […] could find compatible with their interests" (*ibid*., 136; emphasis added). Whereas dissemination of hegemonic ideas in the domestic sphere relied on institutions like the church, the educational system and the press (*ibid*., 126), on the international arena international organisations (or institutions) would serve as "mechanisms of hegemony" through at least five functions:

> (1) the institutions embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders; (2) they are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order; (3) they ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order; (4) they co-opt the *elites* from the peripheral countries; and (5) they absorb counterhegemonic ideas (*ibid*., 138; emphasis added).

By appreciating these roles that institutions play in legitimising and perpetuating hegemony, it becomes evident that the hegemon does *not* create a hegemonic order or maintain its hegemonic position *only* through coercion with material means; hegemony has social and normative scaffolds.[30]

A similar insight was embraced some years earlier by historian Charles S. Maier (1977, 630), who used the term *consensual hegemony* to describe the post-World War II relationship between the US and Europe. In this reading, hegemony necessitates both the acceptance of a hegemon's *leadership* by the leaders of other countries, in this case the Europeans, and the ability of the hegemon to create "guidelines". At the end of the day, the success and sustainability of hegemony turns on whether it "achieves advances for the whole international structure within which it is exercised", and the durability of a hegemonic order is less certain when "imposed on a zero-sum cockpit […] at the expense of the secondary members of the system" (*ibid*., 631).

G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan (1990, 286) similarly distinguished between hegemony exercised through coercive measures – essentially military and economic inducements – and through the socialisation of elites in the follower states. In this conceptualisation

> [h]egemonic control emerges when foreign elites buy into the hegemon's vision of international order and accept it as their own – that is, when they internalize the norms and value orientations espoused by the hegemon and accept its normative claims about the nature of the international system (*ibid*., 285).

The hegemon's rule is thus legitimised through "the common acceptance of a consensual normative order" by relevant players within the societies of the follower states (*ibid*., 289). In these understandings of hegemonic dynamics, the need for

[30] As Zahran and Ramos (2010, 21; emphasis added) elaborate, from this neo-Gramscian standpoint, hegemony entails "the capacity of a given group to unify a social body that is non-homogenous and marked by contradictions […] *not only through material bases but especially through ideational ones*, developing a common will towards an economic, social and political project".

elite-level consensus, evident in intrinsic accounts of hegemony, thus takes on an international dimension. It is first and foremost the ruling strata of follower states that the hegemon needs to co-opt in order to create and maintain the hegemonic order.

3.3.3.2 Institutionalising hegemonic power

In Ikenberry's (2012, 71–73) later description of what he has come to term a *liberal hegemonic order* – essentially equivalent to the American-led liberal international order (see Sections 2.2 and 2.3 above) – the US has rendered its rule acceptable to others by embedding its power within institutions,[31] via "institutional binding".[32] The hegemon is constrained through reciprocal bargains that are *negotiated* between the hegemon and others, and these tie the leading state's exorbitant power into more or less formalised multilateral institutional forms.

In the simplest quantitative terms, *multilateralism* merely refers to "the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states" (Keohane 1990, 731), but it also has a qualitative dimension based upon "'generalized' principles of conduct" (Ruggie 1992, 574). This renders multilateralism different from "ad hoc bargaining" (Ikenberry 2003, 534). In particular, multilateralism entails expectations of "diffuse" as opposed to "specific" reciprocity, so that each involved party can expect others to behave towards it as they would towards any other party in the arrangement, even when interactions take place over long indeterminate periods of time (Ruggie 1992, 571–72; Rathbun 2011, 247–48). This should, ideally, make the accumulated benefits of multilateral engagement roughly equal in the long run. In this manner,

> a *rule-based hegemonic order* provides advantages for all parties – it is in effect a framework of transactions and cooperation that all states can draw upon in building relationships and pursuing their interests across the international order (Ikenberry 2012, 72; emphasis added).

Being *liberal* means that this order also has a constitutional aspiration, its "foundational rules and institutions operate in complex ways to shape and limit how

[31] An institution is, in the present context, understood quite broadly as "a relatively stable collection of practices and rules [as well as norms] defining appropriate behaviour for specific groups of actors in specific situations" (March and Olsen 1998, 948).

[32] On a thorough discussion of this logic of binding, see especially Ikenberry (2001, chap. 3).

[hegemonic] power is exercised" (Ikenberry 2019, 9; see also Nexon and Wright 2007, 257–58).

In a Gilpinian vein (see Section 3.1.1), within such an order it befalls disproportionately upon the hegemon to provide certain public goods, most notably security protection and an open economic order, and this public good provision means that the hegemon effectively discounts the costs it incurs in the short-term over longer-term objectives like peace and systemic stability (Ikenberry 2012, 72). The hegemon thinks in terms of long- as opposed to short-term interests (cf. Brown 2001), it forgoes the potential to extract rents and pursue immediate "possession goals" in favour of achieving system-stabilising "milieu goals" (Wolfers 1962; see also Tocci 2008). By tying its power into institutions, the hegemon not only lowers transaction and enforcement costs by creating regular channels of cooperation, but also serves to legitimise hegemonic rule (Krisch 2005, 373–75; Ikenberry 2003, 534–35, 540–43).

Institutional binding is a two-way street. From the standpoint of others, institutional arenas provide channels to influence the hegemon: places to voice their concerns, a level of access to the hegemon's decision-making processes, and more-or-less established informal and formal forums for negotiation. Institutions are thus "multifaceted arenas for ongoing 'pulling and hauling' between leading and secondary states" (Ikenberry 2012, 73), or "social sites of *reciprocal* ties of authority" (Nexon and Wright 2007, 258; emphasis in original). All these factors render the hegemon's exorbitant position of power more acceptable for the other stakeholders in the international system. A key point to reiterate is that institutionalisation ultimately serves to legitimise hegemonic rule. In this way, once in place, institutions can perpetuate hegemony even when the hegemon's material advantage erodes – the leading state effectively casts its influence into the future by making it coterminous with the institutional fabric of the order (Krisch 2005, 375–76; Ikenberry 2003, 541).

To reap any of these benefits that accrue from institutionalisation, a hegemon must credibly signal to other states that it is willing to abide by the rules of the institutions it has helped set up. By engaging in such "strategic restraint" (Ikenberry 1998), the hegemon must forgo the temptation to evade international obligations for short-term gain, and give up a degree of policy autonomy, forfeiting some influence to less powerful states in the process (*ibid*., 56–62; Finnemore 2009, 69; Krisch 2005, 378). Moreover, as these institutions with their constituent norms become entrenched – ensconced with authority and legitimacy in and of themselves – they also become considerably harder for the hegemon to circumvent. On the one hand, it is difficult for the hegemon to make a case that it should be exempt from rules that others should abide by without, in the process, undermining the legitimacy of the institutions or broader order it has helped construct (Cronin 2001, 113). On the other hand, once

established, institutions – especially formalised international organisations – take on a life of their own, becoming agents in their own right. They are no longer artefacts designed by the hegemon for the hegemon, they assume a plethora of norm-setting, monitoring and persuading functions (Finnemore 2009, 60).

As such, institutions assume many forms. They can be manifestly formal, enshrined in broad-based treaties or treaty-based organisations with quasi-constitutional quality, or informal, like intermittent practices of consultation among fluctuating groupings of states (Ikenberry 2012, 85–86; see also Krisch 2005; Prantl 2014; Abbott *et al*. 2000; Nexon and Wright 2007, 257–58). The most formalised institutions are legally-binding, have precisely formulated rules, and an organisational body to which states have delegated authority (Abbott *et al*. 2000, 401–02), *e.g*. the UN, NATO or the WTO. Informal institutions, in contrast, are issue-specific "cluster[s] of connected norms, rules and principles" (Prantl 2014, 453; see also Creutz 2017). They can work within or independent of organisational and formalised multilateral frameworks, and usually consist of a smaller number of stakeholders.[33]

The key distinction between formal and informal multilateral arrangements is the application of broadly accepted and codified (*i.e.* legal) norms to all parties (Krisch 2005, 379). In the former case, new norms are fairly cumbersome to create, and old norms tend to be resistant to change. The powerful need to cross a higher bar to *justify* future deviation from said norms (see Reus-Smit 2004b, 40–41), and violation may bring about considerable legitimacy costs (Reus-Smit 2007, 163–65; Krisch 2005, 374–76, 379–80). This is something the Bush administration, for instance, certainly found out in the international fallout of its decision to invade Iraq (cf. Reus-Smit 2004a; Hurd 2007; Brooks and Wohlforth 2005), while the Trump administration has already had to grapple with broad condemnation on issues ranging from climate change to economic sanctions (see *e.g*. Lake 2018; Geranmayeh and Lafont Rapnouil 2019; Mehling and Vihma 2017). In the latter instance, less binding normative frameworks and more homogenous memberships give a hegemon more leeway to set the agenda and ignore rules that it finds overly constraining. However,

[33] The formal/informal divide thus also underlines the perennial "tension between efficiency in decision making and the legitimacy conveyed by wider participation" (Kahler 1992, 702). Cooperation with many stakeholders also faces further hurdles such as "free riding" and stasis brought about by the difficulty of striking deals amongst many actors harbouring potentially disparate values and interests (Kahler 1992, 690; Ruggie 1992, 593; Hurrell 2005a, 35–36). Informal institutions can thus present competing alternatives to formal fora (so-called "exit institutions") or complementary talking shops to improve their perceived shortcomings (so-called "voice institutions") (Prantl 2014, 459, 463–65). Recent shifts to informal multilateralism have been noted, *e.g.*, in the realm of global financial governance and the non-proliferation regime (see *e.g.* Vezirgiannidou 2013; Prantl 2014; Morse and Keohane 2014).

this increased room for manoeuvre may come at the cost of broader international legitimacy for the hegemon's normative designs (Vezirgiannidou 2013, 646–47; Krisch 2005, 391–94). In a hegemonic order, institutions and their constituent norms may therefore have different implications for the powerful and the less powerful; they may be less constraining on the former than the latter or may apply equally to all. The creation and operation of institutions on the international arena remains invariably infused with disparities in power (Hurrell 2006, 10).

3.3.3.3 Hegemony as a fundamental institution of international society

In yet another prominent take, writing in the international society (or English School) tradition, Ian Clark (2009c, 214) again starts from the premise that hegemony "is not merely a material presence, but needs to be underpinned by social understandings". As such, it entails "special rights and responsibilities" that are bestowed upon the powerful with the requisite "resources to lead" (Clark 2009a, 24). For Clark (2009c, 214) hegemony should be thought of as a "primary institution of international society", which comes about during "material conditions of primacy", when one state enjoys a profound preponderance in material capabilities. In Clark's (*ibid*., 219) formulation, the distinction between primary and secondary institutions bears particular relevance:

> [T]here is a category of primary institutions that designates the distinctive character of international society, and, separately, a category of secondary institutions that may reflect contingent features through which these institutions are implemented […] [S]econdary institutions are not a necessary or defining attribute of the primary institution itself: they merely reflect the specific historical circumstances in which the hegemony comes into play, as well as the distinctive qualities and preferences of the particular hegemon.

Primary institutions are thus emergent or "informal […] [,] performed through fundamental and durable shared practices", while secondary institutions "are formal and designed […] [to] perform specific administrative and regulative functions" (Flockhart 2016, 14). The canonical reference point for primary institutions is Hedley Bull's (1977, 74) work, wherein he distinguished between five such institutions: "the balance of power, international law, the diplomatic mechanism, the managerial system of the great powers and war". In a hegemonic order, hegemony effectively substitutes for the traditional managerial role that international society scholars grant to the great powers (Clark 2009c, 214–15).

The problem with hegemony from this perspective is that in a hegemonic order the "axis of legitimacy" between the great powers, based on "horizontal concert", is

no longer operative, at least not in a way congruent to a multipolar system defined by a group of great powers (Clark 2009c, 220; see also Brown 2004, 17). The key question again becomes *to what extent* the secondary institutions the hegemon endeavours to set up reflect the preferences of the other stakeholders in international society (Clark 2009c, 220). Are these frameworks, in a word, *legitimate*, and are "practices of legitimacy sustainable" when one state enjoys a disproportionately preponderant position of power (Clark 2009b, 465). Consent of the governed to a "social institution" thus remains crucial for the operation (and operationalisation) of hegemony (Clark 2009c, 223).

Gerry Simpson (2004) has made a similar conceptual innovation by introducing the notion of *legalised hegemony* to get to grips with the unequal manifestation of sovereignty in international life.[34] This means hegemony could be considered not only a political concept, but also "a *juridical category* dependent on the 'recognition' of 'rights and duties' and the consent of other states in the system" (*ibid*., 70; emphasis added). The concept refers to situations in which other states grant great powers special privileges and responsibilities to work in concert to uphold certain (legal) norms – potentially impinging on the sovereignty of other states in the process – as well as the outsized possibility that great powers collectively have to legislate or lay down the law within international institutional fora. In this vein, international law actually acknowledges a special category of sovereigns – the great powers – with certain "constitutional privileges" (*ibid*., 52). Inequalities in material capabilities, alongside the willingness to harness that capacity to perform certain ordering tasks within international society, could feasibly give rise to privileges of order making,[35] as well as "special responsibilities" of order maintenance. For the hegemon, such responsibilities present "licenses to exercise one's capabilities in particular ways […] for other social actors, they represent justified sites of critique; normative reference points against which […] [the hegemon] can be held to account" (Bukovansky *et al*. 2012, 70).

3.3.3.4 Dimensions of hegemonic legitimacy

All the above-described accounts of hegemonic order thus shift attention away from the material power of the hegemon towards legitimacy and the processes of legitimation necessary for both achieving and maintaining hegemony. Of course,

[34] Simpson (2004, 42–56) sets out three different understandings of sovereign equality: "formal", "legislative" and "existential". The first merely refers to equality before (international) law, the second to states' ability to participate equally in the creation of international law, and the third to a state's right to exist as a member of international society regardless of its internal mode of political organisation.

[35] In this sense, the hegemon is a "system maker and privilege taker" (Mastanduno 2009).

there is nothing particularly novel about this understanding of the concept. Hegemony (or *hēgemonia*) as "legitimate authority", "an honorific status conferred by others in recognition of the benefits an actor has provided to the community as a whole", has deep roots (Lebow 2007, 124). It was already established in the writings of Thucydides and his contemporaries in fifth- and fourth-century B.C. Greece (*ibid*.). In a more contemporary context, Mark Suchman (1995, 574) defines legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions". In a political order, legitimacy can thus be generally understood as "the governed recognizing the right of the governors to lead, and, to a certain extent, their entitlement to the perks of power […] a process through which both political power and obedience are justified" (Coicaud 2010, 17). It is legitimacy that ultimately renders power authoritative (Hurd 1999, 400–401), making it possible for an actor to exercise "rightful rule". Authority, in this formulation, could be viewed as a type of power an actor has over others. However, it is not power grounded upon credible threats of coercion, but on the belief – on the part of the ruled – that a ruler (or a rule or set of rules) commands legitimacy (Lake 2009, 8, 21–23).

When speaking of legitimacy in the context of hegemonic orders, two dimensions, agential and institutions-based, appear particularly relevant. Firstly, legitimacy can be conferred upon the hegemon as an *actor*, contingent on the extent to which the hegemon's decisions, actions, interests and identities are "socially sanctioned" (Reus-Smit 2007, 158, 163). This underlines that legitimacy is "a social and relational phenomenon", and, thereby, its conferral is dependent on the perceptions of significant others (Finnemore 2009, 61), namely those actors who make up the hegemon's "social constituency of legitimation", "the grouping in which legitimation is sought" (Reus-Smit 2007, 164). This means that a hegemon is a legitimate actor only to the extent that its followers deem it to be so, and that a hegemon is habitually forced to make "legitimacy claims" in order "to justify […] [its] identities, interests, practices, or institutional designs" to significant others in the international arena (*ibid*., 159).

Secondly, legitimacy can be bestowed upon the *institutions* (and their component norms) that constitute the hegemonic order. Herein

> there is a generalized perception that its [the institution's] normative precepts are rightful, that they warrant respect and compliance for more than self-interested reasons, for reasons of their normative standing (Reus-Smit 2007, 159).

In this case, too, legitimacy is ultimately founded on a "belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed", so legitimacy retains its "subjective quality, relational between actor and institution, and defined by the actor's perception of the institution" (Hurd 1999, 381). Again, the institutions of the hegemonic order are legitimate only if states partaking in the order regard them as such.

These two dimensions of legitimacy in the hegemonic order cannot be easily dissociated from each other. Norms and the institutions within which they are embedded do not merely act as regulative constraints on actors or as prescriptions of how actors ought to conduct themselves;[36] norms also constitute actors' interests and identities. States are socialised into accepting these norms *not only* as guideposts for international conduct, but *also* as building blocks of what it means to be a rightful member of international society in the first place – norms have regulative, constitutive and prescriptive functions (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891–92; see also Risse and Sikkink 1999). The institutions and norms of the hegemonic order effectively become the normative baseline against which the conduct of all states – both the followers and the hegemon – are assessed. At the same time, however, these normative parameters create intrinsic motivations for states to act in a manner consonant with the existing precepts of the order (cf. Björkdahl 2002, 13–17). In a manner of speaking, norms act as a link between the socio-institutional and intrinsic accounts of hegemony.

From the standpoint of the hegemon and the hegemonic order, this link between norms and state action has notable implications. On the one hand, insofar as the norms of the hegemonic order constitute the hegemon's identity and, by implication, have bearing on its interests, acting in a manner consonant with normative precepts serves to reproduce and reinforce the hegemon's sense of self, its very "hegemonness".[37] The hegemon and other states are enmeshed in a "constant dialogue with the prevailing norms of legitimate agency" that, in turn, have bearing

[36] In this sense, rules make up a subset of norms, they pertain to the regulative dimension of norms. Meanwhile, institutions, as understood here, make up a meta-category within which various different norms can be embedded (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891–92).

[37] The link between norms, identities, interests and action is inherently complex, but some clarificatory points are in order. Insofar as identities are fathomed as social categories, they by definition necessitate the espousal of certain norms regarding what it means to belong to that particular social category, which then render some interests and classes of action unfathomable for an actor with a particular identity (see *e.g.* Fearon 1999, 27; Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996, 54–60; Katzenstein 1996, 5). When it comes to interests, norms can feasibly affect their formulation indirectly by altering actor identities, but also directly, by teaching actors about the realm of possibility available to them for meeting their needs within a certain social environment (Finnemore 1996, 12–13, 29; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 897).

upon their identities as international actors and, conceivably, the interests they are willing to pursue (Reus-Smit 2004b, 22). On the other hand, when the hegemon behaves in accordance with the normative parameters of the hegemonic order, it actually serves to fortify the institutions and norms that make up the said order and, by extension, helps to reify the hegemon's position as the leading state in that order. There is thus a

> mutually implicating relationship between legitimating norms and state behaviour: state behaviour that follows legitimating norms is seen by [other] states as legitimate, and it in turn reproduces the legitimacy of the norms (Hurd 2007, 197).

This implies that there are different potential sources from which the norms of the hegemonic order, not to mention the hegemon itself, draw their legitimacy and become authoritative. The canonical distinction is made between *substantive* and *procedural (or processual*) sources of legitimacy. In the case of the former, legitimacy derives from "normative correctness or desirability" of a particular norm or action, on the extent to which they are justifiable with "shared end-values, goals, core principles and collective understandings, in terms of which any new initiative or action needs to be justified" (Rapkin and Braaten 2009, 122; see also Hurrell 2005b, 20). In other words, from the standpoint of substantive legitimacy it is crucial that other actors deem the norm, behaviour or actor in question as appropriate (March and Olsen 1998). In modern society, legitimacy is often linked to the "rational-legal" character of norms and institutions, which is "invested in legalities, procedures, rules, and bureaucracies and thus rendered impersonal" (Finnemore 2009, 69; see also Barnett and Finnemore 2005, 170–71).[38]

In the latter case, the focus is on whether a norm, institution, decision or action has come about through "right process" (T. M. Franck 1988, 706), regardless of how such processes may be defined in a particular community or politico-legal order.[39] Rapkin and Braaten (2009) have sought to categorise further such processual aspects of *hegemonic legitimacy*. On the one hand, they argue that a hegemon's legitimacy turns on "open, accessible decision-making" that allows for "transparency, decentralisation and many points of informal access". The hegemon should thus

[38] Following Max Weber (1978), other candidates for producing legitimacy in this sense could be tradition or charisma.

[39] Hurrell (2005b, 18) argues that the processes through which (legal) norms are created in today's international society are increasingly complex and pluralistic, which has rendered them a less appealing vehicle for the powerful to use as a means for cementing their power and exercising control over the international arena.

allow other stakeholders in the order to participate in decision-making in pursuit of their interests, or at least provide opportunities to voice their views (*ibid*., 123). On the other hand, Rapkin and Braaten (*ibid*., 123; see also Ikenberry 1998) maintain that a hegemon should be willing to tie its power in institutions, thus signalling that it will not abuse its power position to subjugate others. In processual accounts, the hegemon's legitimacy thus flows from the ways in which the hegemon organises and ultimately manages its relationships with other states in the order, placing more onus on relationality and reciprocity as opposed to the intrinsic qualities of norms or institutions.[40]

Finally, and relatedly, legitimacy can also be seen to flow from *outcomes* or *efficacy*.[41] This has often been captured under the banner of public good provision in theorising on hegemony (Rapkin and Braaten 2009, 124–25; cf. Nye 2017). In this understanding, the hegemon's ability to produce something tangible – e.g. goods like peace, free markets or open global commons – that is also in the interests of other stakeholders renders its leadership legitimate. However, in a social realm the link between legitimacy and outcomes needs to be qualified further. Only "outcomes deemed appropriate", *i.e.* in line with the norms that define the limits of appropriateness, can feasibly be regarded as legitimate (Reus-Smit 2007, 165). There are thus complex linkages between substantive, processual and outcome-oriented conceptualisations of legitimacy.

Here two related concepts, *legitimacy crisis* and *hypocrisy*, further illustrate the dilemmas a hegemon faces when it seeks to attain and harness legitimacy within an international order. Whenever a hegemon's conduct, interests or identities are not in line with the norms that define the parameters of legitimacy within the social order, it risks igniting a *legitimacy crisis*. Such a crisis can pertain either to the hegemon as an agent or to the entire hegemonic order writ large. Christian Reus-Smit (2007, 167) defines a legitimacy crisis "as that critical turning point when decline in an actor's or institution's legitimacy forces adaptation (through re-legitimation or material inducement) or disempowerment". At such a stage, a hegemon faces a choice. It can bring its conduct, interests and/or identities back into line with the standards of legitimacy of the order, seek a "recalibration" wherein the normative parameters of the order are renegotiated, or force acquiescence through potentially costly coercive measures (*i.e.* military force or economic inducements) (*ibid*., 170–73).

A related issue is that of *hypocrisy*. Hegemons, as they institutionalise their rule, are not merely "order makers but also order takers" (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019, 399). This means that they:

40 On the distinction between "rational-legal" and "relational" conceptualisations of authority, see Lake (2009, chap. 1).

41 This can also be referred to as "output legitimacy", see *e.g*. Jokela and Gaens (2012).

> [o]ften feel the constraints of the legitimation structures they, themselves, have created. […] Actors inconvenienced by social rules often resort to hypocrisy: they proclaim adherence to rules or values while violating them in pursuit of other goals. (Finnemore 2009, 72)

Hypocrisy does not merely connote "inconsistency of deeds with words […] [,] it involves deeds that are inconsistent with particular kinds of words – proclamations of moral value and virtue" (*ibid*., 74). Hypocrisy is thus potentially corrosive of legitimacy. It breeds reputational costs for the hegemon, is indicative of the inherent difficulty of pursuing long-term interests in place of short-term desires, and illustrates the impossibility of reconciling conflicting values in practice. It is vital to note that some hypocrisy is unavoidable – even desirable – in political life, and this is especially so for a hegemon with a vast international reach, open to near-instantaneous scrutiny all across the globe (Finnemore 2009, 73–74, 81–83; see also Brown 2001). The situation is further complicated by the fact that the hegemon habitually answers to both domestic and international constituencies of legitimation (Cronin 2001). Therefore, a hegemon needs to craft

> strategies for managing inevitable hypocrisy – strategies that involve some combination of social strength (i.e., deep legitimacy) and sympathy among potential accusers with the values conflict that prompts […] [hegemonic] hypocrisy (Finnemore 2009, 83).

In spite of these issues, there are likely limits to how much constraints legitimacy considerations actually place upon the hegemon. Firstly, *ceteris paribus*, we can expect a materially powerful actor to be able to withstand more legitimacy costs than less fortuitously endowed ones. Secondly, it might be easier for powerful actors to delegitimise institutions or norms of the existing order and thus exact normative change in its favour, simply because it has more material resources, forums and relationships at its disposal to pursue such forays (Keating 2014, 5). Thirdly and relatedly, a key requirement when it comes to a hegemon's willingness to establish institutions and provide public goods is its ability to think in a long- as opposed to short-term manner (cf. Brown 2001). However, this willingness to forgo short-term gains for longer-term ones may pertain to costs as well. In other words, the hegemon may be willing to incur considerable legitimacy costs in the here and now in anticipation of some future payoff (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005, 517–18).

3.3.3.5 Negotiation, narration and hegemonic contestation

The above discussion has sought to illustrate that legitimacy is simultaneously *constitutive* and *constraining* of a hegemon's power. Legitimation is integral to the hegemon's power as authority, and thereby vital for its ability to influence others in the international arena, in turning its material endowments into actual influence. However, through the (speech) act of seeking legitimation, a hegemon actually comes to forfeit a modicum of power *over* its conduct to its followers (Finnemore 2009, 60). Precisely because the social understanding of hegemony distinguishes the concept from "direct subordination", or rule that draws on command and (the threat of) coercion, maintaining hegemony necessitates "a constant […] process of negotiation between the strong and the weak" (Hurrell 2007, 270). As Mlada Bukovansky (2007, 178) puts it "[t]he politics of legitimacy claims and counter-claims play themselves out through political rhetoric, because legitimacy requires consent, and consent requires persuasion". When it pursues and maintains hegemony, a leading state is thus engrossed in an "interactive process" (Goh 2019, 619), and in such a process the articulation of persuasive hegemonic visions becomes crucial.

This makes hegemonic orders inherently *dynamic* as opposed to *static*. Paradoxically, then, whilst hegemony provides a modicum of stability, it simultaneously remains in an eternal state of flux. However, this flux is not solely driven by shifts in relative material capabilities, or *innenpolitik* factors, for that matter. Instead, incessant "cultivation of legitimacy" takes place through a recurring process of normative contestation between different stakeholders in the hegemonic order (Hurrell 2007, 270; see also Goh 2013, chap. 1). From this standpoint hegemonic *leadership* is ultimately premised on the ability of the hegemon to render its particular conceptions of order, or some component parts of order, into broadly-accepted ones through a process of "hegemonic contestation" (Koskenniemi 2004, 199). Hegemony is achieved – or more aptly activated – through language, via discursive means. A hegemonic discourse thus becomes a prerequisite for exercising hegemonic leadership.

> The notion of hegemony rests on the assumption that any discourse tries to dominate the field of discursivity. Power and the ability […] to transform […] material capabilities into leadership will thus depend on an actor's ability to present his own particular worldview as compatible with the communal aims. (Nabers 2010, 938)

In this vein, hegemonic leadership over a (group of) follower(s) begs "a successful strategy of legitimation" (Hurd 2007, 204).

Hegemonic discourses should not, therefore, be fathomed as mere cheap talk, veils upon insidious or self-interested designs – although this can admittedly be part of the story (cf. Schimmelfennig 2003, 62–63). When it comes to processes of legitimating hegemonic rule, words really matter in and of themselves, and are worthy of study in their own right (Goddard and Krebs 2015). Nor should such hegemonic discourses be regarded naively as reflections of some graspable reality – they are by definition more or less "utopian" in their formulation (Vogt 2005), and also remain irredeemably fragmentary (Krebs 2015b, 11). From this standpoint, hegemonic discourses regularly assume a *narrative form*, they are essentially stories that are crafted to legitimise, to an audience, the hegemon's identities, interests, policy-proposals, actions, the very building blocks of the hegemonic order, or perhaps even future visions for developing said order. In this vein,

> stories are the vehicles through which human beings define their reality and link thought to action—through which they formulate and articulate identity (who self and other are) and interest (what self and other want). Public *narratives are ubiquitous because meaning-making is essential to the human condition and because legitimation is the life blood of politics*. Only some narratives, however, become dominant, an accepted 'common sense' about the world [in a word, hegemonic], and thus set the boundaries of what actors can legitimately articulate in public, what they can collectively (though not individually) imagine, and what is politically possible. (Krebs 2015a, 813; emphasis added)

This also means that the identities and interests of actors, insofar as they are tied to narratives that flow within a certain social sphere, can exhibit fluctuation in accordance with the story that is being crafted and the audience that it addresses (Krebs 2015b, 10).

Yet, it is hardly a foregone conclusion that a hegemon's preferred interpretation of reality comes to hold sway or that its attempts at legitimation are always successful. We should not assume by theoretical fiat that the "constituencies of legitimation" (Reus-Smit 2007, 164), the significant others on the international arena to whom a hegemon must habitually justify its visions, policies and actions, are easily duped (Goddard and Krebs 2015, 11–12; see also Schimmelfennig 2003, 63–65; Risse 2000, 17). Such can be the case even in situations where a powerful actor has considerable control over the discursive space. Albeit pervasive, hegemonic discourses are hardly unchallengeable, they "always contain enough contradictory strands to permit contestation" (Krebs and Lobasz 2007, 411, n. 2).

All this implies a further point worthy of elaboration when it comes to the role assumed by the hegemon in on-going processes of hegemonic contestation. Given that hegemonic orders are not static, they are by definition creatures that require

constant nurturing by the leading state (cf. Kagan 2018; Lehti and Pennanen 2020). In other words, the hegemon must routinely both *defend* and *develop* the order, which means that its role in the negotiation process is not necessarily that of a *status quo* actor that tries to stave off challenges to the order from other states; the hegemon can also be a revisionist actor that seeks to alter the rules of the order (Ikenberry 2012, 146–47; Jervis 2011).[42] The hegemon often harbours ideas about reforming the constitutive institutions or norms of the order or some subset of it, and may spend a considerable amount of energy in trying to legitimise such novel designs (Keating 2014), in articulating novel hegemonic visions. In this manner, institutional change in the hegemonic order is simultaneously a "process of delegitimation [...] [and] a project of relegitimation of new understandings" (Hurd 2007, 196). In the aftermath of 9/11, for instance, the US has spent vast amounts of manpower and dollars in an attempt to shape the regional order of the Middle East, and – as will be argued in due course – these investments have been accompanied by a barrage of policy documents and speeches outlining a novel ordering vision for this troubled region (to little avail, one might add).

3.3.3.6 The complexity of hegemonic power

There are two further crucial elements in discussions on the socio-institutional trappings of hegemony that must be brought to the fore – in fact, both have implicitly foregrounded the whole of the preceding discussion. These are the relationship such accounts have with the concept of power *per se* (descriptive) and their views on how the American hegemon should endeavour to exercise power (prescriptive).

In the former case, the above discussion points to manifestations of America's hegemonic power that *neither* the material image, where the enviable material advantage the hegemon enjoys allows it to *compel* others to dance to its tune, *nor* the notion of "usable power", which flows from the internal attributes of the hegemonic state, can capture. Here it is useful to borrow from Barnett and Duvall's (2005) typology, which divides power into *compulsory*, *institutional*, *structural* and

[42] To illustrate that revisionism does not always need to imply that a state seeks to shift the balance of power in the system, Cooley, Nexon and Ward (2019, 695; emphasis in original) distinguish between different types of revisionist states thus: "Ideal-typical *status-quo* actors express satisfaction with both the current distribution of capabilities and the nature of the international order. *Reformist* orientations combine a desire to change the terms of the order and satisfaction with the existing distribution of capabilities. *Positionalist* ones accept the terms of the current order, but would like to see a change in the distribution of capabilities. In other words, reformists are *order* revisionists, while positionalists are *distribution-of-power* revisionists. Ideal-typical *revolutionary* actors are dual-revisionists: they want to overturn both the distribution of capabilities and the broader order."

productive manifestations.[43] These categories are distinguished based, firstly, on whether power functions through "interactions" or "social relations of constitution". Power is thus either exercised by an actor to "affect the ability of others to control the circumstances of their existence" or creates social actors by "constitut[ing] them as social beings with their respective capacities and interest" (*ibid*., 45–46). Secondly, power can work "directly" or "diffusely", that is to say power can entail "an immediate and generally tangible causal or constitutive connection" or function across "physical, temporal and spatial distance" (*ibid*., 47–48).

Barnett and Duvall (2005, 49–50) equate *compulsory power* with the ability of an actor to "shape directly the circumstances or actions of another", which entails "control by identifiable actors over the objections of other actors through deployment (even if only symbolically) of resources". Compulsory power is thus often associated with realism and, in terms of the present exposition, the material image of hegemony (see Section 3.1.1 above). However, the concept's purview also includes the use of non-material means of power. Hence, socio-institutional accounts of hegemony are privy to compulsory power insofar as they appreciate how actors can use coercion through institutional or ideational channels, for instance when institutions compel states to change their behaviour by issuing legally-binding verdicts, when states deliver verbal threats to each other,[44] or when they engage in practices of "naming and shaming" or ostracism (*ibid*., 50–51; see also Risse and Sikkink 1999; Schimmelfennig 2001; Müller 2014).

Relatedly, institutions, their constituent norms, rules and practices – insofar as they are skewed in the hegemon's favour – grant the hegemon a modicum of *institutional power*. In contradistinction to compulsion, this form of power works over physical, temporal and/or spatial distance. In this case "[actor] A does not 'possess' the resources of power, but because A stands in a particular relation to the relevant institutional arrangements, its actions exercise power over B". As already argued at length, institutions, through their entrenched norms, rules and practices, create "frozen configurations of privilege and bias that can continue to shape the future choices of actors" (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 51–52). (American) hegemonic power "is [thus] indirect and mediated through institutions" (*ibid*., 64). Of particular relevance here is the power of the hegemon to set agendas (Nye 2011, 12–13, 129),

[43] Barnett and Duvall (2005, 42, 45) define power as "the production, in and through social relations, of effects on actors that shape their capacity to control their fate", they are thus privy to both the relational and social underpinnings of power.

[44] It pays to note that the issuance of a threat (even one entailing the potential use of military force or imposition of economic sanctions) is a *speech act* and can, thereby, be understood to reside in the realm of the symbolic or ideational. See only the concept of securitisation as introduced by the Copenhagen school of security studies (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1999; Vuori 2014).

as well as the various prerogatives of the powerful – whether it comes to voting power, staffing or financing – enshrined into the formal and informal frameworks of international institutions (Woods 2003).

Upon reflection, however, the power of the hegemon can appear more pervasive and diffuse still. *Structural power* is "the power to choose and to shape the structures […] within which other states, their political institutions, their economic enterprises, and (not least) their professional people have to operate" (Strange 1987, 565).[45] This form of power appears diffuse, but it is established at formative moments of order-building when vast swathes of the order's normative makeup are being forged. By acting as an agent of institutional innovation at the very moment of the hegemonic order's creation, the hegemon is effectively "establishing the structures [not just the particular institutions] from which structural power may subsequently flow" (Kitchen and Cox 2019, 743). In this sense, ruptures in the international system are "constitutional moments" in a dual sense (Ikenberry 2019). They are not only opportunities for "drafting" a (quasi-)constitutional order on a global scale, they are also constitutive of structural positions of dominance and subjugation, creating entrenched relational binaries like hegemon/follower or core/periphery.[46] Once set in place, such positions and their constituent roles persist and are difficult to circumvent, even if the hegemon does not intentionally seek to bring its influence to bear on others (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 52–55; Kitchen and Cox 2019, 742–45).

Finally, the power of the hegemon can become manifest through language to produce "particular kinds of subjects, fix meanings and categories, and create what is taken for granted and the ordinary of world politics" (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 57). Discourse thus sets the parameters of the fathomable, defines what is deemed (ab)normal. In many respects this kind of *productive power* is the greatest power of all, but its diffuseness means that it is not controlled by an agent – in this vein the hegemon is as much constituted by discourse as any other actor. For the socio-institutional image of hegemony, productive power is relevant when assessing the contests over "historically contingent and changing understandings, meanings, norms, customs, and social identities that make possible, limit, and are drawn on for action" (*ibid*., 56–57). These battles can unfold over categories like "civilised" or "liberal", but also converge around key norms and values that the hegemon holds dear, like "democracy", "freedom" or the "rule of law". In this manner, "productive power […] emerges out of a contest between different worldviews and normative visions" (Diez 2013, 203).

45 In Strange's (1987, 571) account, structural power flows from four structures: security, production, financial and knowledge.

46 Examples from other contexts could include *e.g*. lord/vassal, master/slave and core/periphery.

The established links between institutions, the production of legitimacy and hegemony, also underscore key insights about how hegemons *should* exercise power in the international system or, perhaps more aptly put, go about being a hegemon. Socio-institutional accounts illustrate that from the standpoint of the hegemon – insofar as it endeavours to remain the predominant state – the key question becomes how it can maintain and enhance the legitimacy of the hegemonic order and/or the legitimacy of hegemonic leadership.

In this context, two further points regarding the hegemon's power warrant attention. The first ties into the perennial debate in the US over the virtues of *unilateral* versus *multilateral* approaches to the world (see *e.g*. Daalder and Lindsay 2003; Brown 2004; Bertele and Mey 1998; Nye 2002; Cronin 2001; Hastings Dunn 2006). In this case, the critical question is whether the US should harness its outsized abundance of material capabilities to augment the international arena (or the hegemonic order) all by itself, effectively exercising power *over* others, or whether it should empower others *to* exercise power and even employ power *with* them.[47] In fact, this perennial tension between go-it-alone parochialism and broad-based international cooperation has been deemed the central "paradox" of America's hegemonic attainment. In short, even the most powerful (in material terms) state in the international system cannot expect to achieve its aims alone (Cronin 2001; Nye 2002).[48] The costs of unilateralism have been conceptualised in the literature in terms of increased risks of counterbalancing by other states, jeopardising the efficiency gains that accrue from institutionalisation, as well as undermining hegemonic legitimacy (cf. Brooks and Wohlforth 2005; Bukovansky *et al*. 2012, 71–72; Reus-Smit 2004a; Krisch 2005; Ikenberry 2012, 268–75). As already argued at length above, for socio-institutional accounts especially the latter two dynamics are of concern, although "soft balancing" against the hegemon may also have relevance (see Section 3.3.4.1 below).

This discussion links up to the second much-debated distinction when it comes to US foreign policy, namely the demarcation between *soft* and *hard power*

47 On the *power over*, *power to* and *power with* distinctions, where the first is associated with the Dahlian conception of power wherein A gets B to do something it otherwise would not do, the second with the power to exact change despite some structural constraints and the third to power exercised in collaborative relationships with others, see *e.g*. Haugaard (2011), Partzsch (2017), Partzsch and Fuchs (2012), and Barnett and Duvall (2005, 46–47).

48 Bruce Cronin (2001) argues that the relationship of the US with international institutions has been marked by a "role strain" between a great-power role and a hegemonic role, a strain that he calls the "paradox of hegemony". The US appears stuck between satisfying short-term parochial interests of a great power that often originate in the domestic arena, and acting in a manner consonant with the responsibilities and obligations that are felt by and bestowed upon a hegemonic leader.

introduced by Joseph S. Nye (1990) in the early 1990s. Nye (2011, 90–94) has argued that the hegemon can co-opt others – as opposed to coercing them through military and economic means – by using what he terms soft power means. In other words, the powerful state can create institutions, set and frame their agendas, persuade others to go along with its designs, or draw on the sheer attraction of its values, culture or political system. In this reading, soft power is thus ultimately grounded on the legitimacy of a state's culture, its values and its (foreign) policies (Nye 2004, 11; 2011, 84–85). Soft power functions either passively through attraction or actively through different processes of legitimation that "can be reinforced by the narratives that […] [states] use to explain foreign policy" (Nye 2019b). From a chiefly instrumental, "logic of consequences" vantage point, soft power is cost-effective for the hegemon. Power is thus inherently "cheaper" when exercised through communicative means, or, better yet, essentially costless when the innate characteristics of the hegemon motivate others to follow its lead via the sheer power of attraction (cf. Lukes 2007, 86). As Nye (2016, 276–77) himself puts it:

> If a country can make its power legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others more willingly follow. If it can establish international rules that are consistent with its society, it will be less likely to have to change. If it can help support institutions that encourage other countries to channel or limit their activities in ways it prefers, it may not need as many costly carrots and sticks.

Relatedly, there is an argument to be made that the use of hard power actually crowds out the hegemon's soft power, or at the very least renders it less effective. In this reading, hard power is often used in contravention of "the shared system of normative constraints", so that its use corrodes the "mutual reciprocity and dependence" that are tantamount to the creation of soft power in the first place (Haugaard 2011, 4).

All this implies that others find being co-opted to the hegemon's cause through soft power easier to stomach than coercion. Soft power lends followers agency – or at least a sufficient illusion of agency – to warrant acquiescence that does not breed resentment.[49] Of course, there is a related normative "logic of appropriateness" case

[49] On the other hand, it should be noted that harnessing soft power means to influence others is an inherently complex affair, more complex still than the use of coercion. The strength of soft power is therefore also its weakness: it relies on others' perceptions of the hegemon's conduct or, perhaps more aptly, on the willingness of others to be co-opted in the first place. In addition, soft power might take a considerable amount of time to produce results, and neither the resources nor means through which it is exercised are completely under the control of governments (Nye 2011, 83).

to be made that the hegemon should eschew the use of "coercive" hard power instruments, for instance military action, economic sanctions and threats thereof, in favour of "co-optive" soft power means.[50] Brute force would be saved for some extraordinary circumstances like a humanitarian crisis, impending genocide or a gross violation of international law (especially with regard to Chapter VII of the UN Charter) (Reus-Smit 2004a, 126–28; Sinkkonen 2015, chap. 4). Moreover, it pays to note that engaging in normatively desirable conduct is hardly tantamount to calling for "self-abnegation" by the hegemon. Instead, it is merely instructive for the hegemon to not blatantly disregard the concerns of others in the hegemonic order for both self-interested and ethical reasons (Brown 2001, 22–23).

3.3.4 Unpacking a hegemon's relationships

The discussion on socio-institutional accounts of hegemony has so far placed much emphasis on institutions and the production of legitimacy *in* and *through* said fora. However, any social account of the international arena must remain privy to relationships between its constituent parts – what has been above termed the "infrastructure" side of hegemonic order (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019; Cooley and Nexon 2020). It is evident that the relationships a hegemon has with other states can differ in terms of material asymmetry, in light of the depth of institutionalisation and intensity of interactions between the hegemon and the other state, as well as in terms of inherently social parameters that define the relationship as amicable or hostile, or even trusting or distrusting.

In his account on liberal hegemony, Ikenberry (2012, 82–91) argues that hegemons can employ different ideal-typical "strategies of rule" by either setting up *rules-based arrangements*, already discussed at length above, or by engaging in different *relationships*, although in reality these two modes interlock and overlap.[51] John G. Ruggie (1992, 567–568; see Section 3.3.3.2 above), in turn, speaks of "bilateralism" alongside "multilateralism" as "generic institutional form[s] in international relations", with unique quantitative and qualitative attributes. The distinctions further drive home the point that a hegemon's standing within international society entails *both* the embedding of hegemonic rule into norms, rules and institutions *and* the management of *dyadic relationships* that are marked by different material and social underpinnings.

Generally speaking, *bilateralism* merely refers to dyadic cooperation between two states, no matter how *ad hoc*, informal or unequal in character (Ruggie 1992,

50 Nye (2004, 8; 2011, 21) proposes that different means of exercising power can be placed on a continuum spanning from coercive (hard) to co-optive (soft).

51 Ikenberry (2012, 82–91) uses the terms "rule by rules" and "rule by relationships".

568). The institutionalised relationship is negotiated on a case-by-case basis, so reciprocity tends to be "specific" in nature (*ibid*., 572–73). This means that bilateralism is subject to diluted "demands for coherence and equal treatment", which should, *ceteris paribus*, allow the stronger party to structure the parameters of the relationship in a manner it deems fit (Krisch 2005, 390).[52] The powerful state may thus be tempted to substitute multilateral fora for bilateral engagement in order to impress its agendas upon a less powerful party, but there is a trade-off: bilateralisation means that the hegemon forgoes the advantages of regulation, stabilisation and legitimation associated with multilateral institutions (*ibid*., 373–74, 390; Ikenberry 2012, 109–16).

In the presence of asymmetries of material power, the defining features of bilateral dyads in the international arena can range from direct exploitation in the vein of colonial empires of centuries past through different brands of patron-client relations all the way to so-called "special relationships". Bilateral contacts, therefore, vary in terms of how much the stronger party impinges on the weaker side's sovereignty, and how unequally the benefits of the relationship are distributed (Ikenberry 2012, 88–90). Yet bilateral relations can also have a contractual basis, a formalised treaty-based grounding that also creates international legal obligations for both parties (Blum 2008). The US, for instance, has constructed an elaborate overseas basing network that consists of many different types of dyadic relationships, some based on Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs) and others more *ad hoc* in nature (Cooley and Nexon 2013).

Entrenched patterns of amity and enmity are also key features of certain international relationships – the US-Israel and US-Iran relationships, respectively, come to mind as pertinent examples here – and fluctuations in relative power will not, at least not automatically, shift the social underpinnings of the relationship in any meaningful manner (see only Hopf 2010; Mercer 2005; Wendt 1999). Moreover, such international relationships do not exist in a vacuum, especially when it comes to the leading state in the order. Reneging on bilateral commitments may thus create legitimacy costs *not only* in relation to the other party in the dyad, *but also* the international arena more broadly, at least insofar as such conduct makes the hegemon appear generally less benevolent, credible or trustworthy. The hegemon must be privy to the fact that "power can be limited (or enhanced) by its own exercises", it must habitually "self-limit its arbitrariness" to guarantee deference from others (Womack 2015, 156–57).

[52] We should also expect the hegemon's room for manoeuvre to be more pronounced the more profound the asymmetry in material capabilities between the parties happens to be. It is certainly harder for the US to impose its will on Russia or Germany than on, say, Libya or Guatemala.

The materially weaker state in the dyad can thus enjoy comparative advantages *vis-à-vis* the hegemon. These can pertain to, for instance, the "intensity of interests, externalities with regard to other relationships, and information about the workings of the other [*i.e*. the hegemonic] state" (Musgrave 2019a, 285). Brantly Womack (2015, 47) speaks of the "politics of asymmetric attention" that tend to characterise most asymmetric relationships. Barring a crisis situation, when a hegemon's attention can be overly fixated upon a certain relationship for a long period of time – think of the US preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era or Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011 – in normal times the hegemon can be expected to fall back on "stereotyped […] relational climates" in its encounters with smaller states, effectively reinforcing pre-set identity categories like "friend" or "enemy" in the process (*ibid*., 49). The hegemon may also engage in inconsistent policies towards smaller states, as overarching political coordination between different government bureaucracies will not be forthcoming for every bilateral dyad at all times. More troubling still for the hegemon, such pathologies of (in)attention may lead it to choose an imprudent course of action, with detrimental effects on the relationship, when a particular dyad *does* rise above the threshold of mundanity (*ibid*., 49; see also Walt 2006, 101–3).

Such pathologies become especially relevant when – as described at length above – we appreciate that other states have agency within a hegemonic order; they harbour at least some potential for contestation *vis-à-vis* the hegemon in particular and the order in general. In this vein,

> [t]he success of hegemonic control is not simply a matter of what the dominant states [*sic*] seeks to do, or how it does it. The character of the subject states and societies provide a critical determinant of if, and how, hegemonic ordering plays out. (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019, 419).

All this points towards the need to appreciate how the hegemon must engage in constant *relationship management* to sustain and develop the hegemonic order. Such nurturing of relations is important whether this occurs *vis-à-vis* allies, partners, hegemonic challengers, "spoilers" or even "rogue regimes".

3.3.4.1 Accommodating and opposing hegemony

Given that other states are not mere marionettes dancing to the hegemon's tune, they possess a menu of options that fall short of blindly succumbing to the hegemon's will. Stephen M. Walt (2006, chap. 4) argues that these approaches can be *accommodational* or *oppositional* in nature, but these are perhaps better treated as

two ends of a continuum, with potential variation in how strongly states either embrace or disavow the hegemon.[53]

As argued at length above, socio-institutional accounts of hegemony emphasise other states' desire to bind the hegemon to institutions not only as a way to check its room for manoeuvre but to render its conduct more cooperative and predictable (Jesse *et al*. 2012, 14). When it comes to accommodation, the archetypal strategy captured by structural realists is *bandwagoning*, where the other states go along with the hegemon in order to protect themselves from regional adversaries. This need not be a passive strategy, however. It can also entail active cultivation of relationships with the hegemon's political leaders, and attempts to *penetrate* its political system through personal contacts on other levels – with legislators, interest groups, military leaders, the business community and so forth – in order to have an effect on how the hegemon wields its power in the world (Walt 2005, 110–11).[54]

Here recent scholarship points to a particular form of penetration, especially relevant in an age of instantaneous global interconnectedness and social media platforms amenable to "hybrid influencing". Other states, especially potential hegemonic rivals or "spoilers" may resort to "wedge strategies" that seek to "divid[e] a target country or coalition, thereby weakening its counterbalancing potential" (Wigell 2019, 256). In Mikael Wigell's (*ibid*., 262–68) interpretation, three sets of techniques can be employed against a target country and its society: "clandestine diplomacy" in support of subversive elements, the use of "geoeconomic tools" to support or contest particular stakeholders and "disinformation" campaigns. These tools may be especially effective when the target is a democratic state defined by "a restrained state, pluralism, free media and an open economy" (*ibid*., 268).

Oppositional strategies, then, go well beyond the traditional internal or external balancing behaviour, namely the building of domestic military capabilities and formation of military alliances, posited by neorealist scholars (Waltz 1979; see Section 3.1.1. above).[55] States can feasibly seek to challenge the hegemon by

[53] Strictly speaking *neutrality* is a middle category between accommodational and oppositional approaches (Jesse *et al*. 2012, 14; Pesu 2019).

[54] In Walt's (2005, 112) interpretation such penetration, when practiced by America's allies and partners, is accommodational in nature because there is nothing illegitimate about it – save for situations where "lobbies [try] to silence U.S. domestic opposition to their agendas".

[55] Christopher Layne (2006b) has constructed the category of *leash-slipping* for cases where other states build up military capabilities not to circumscribe or challenge the hegemon, but to enable them to exercise an independent foreign policy. Here, the key difference with traditional balancing behaviour is that the states engaging in military capacity-building do not feel threatened by the hegemon, they merely long for policy autonomy.

engaging in "economic statecraft",[56] although in this case the deck is, once again, considerably skewed in the hegemon's favour given its enviable structural advantages in the global economy and financial system (see only Norrlof 2010; Kitchen and Cox 2019; Strange 1987). At the height of American power in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many argued that under conditions of systemic unipolarity states prefer to engage in *soft balancing*: "limited, tacit or indirect balancing strategies largely through coalition building and diplomatic bargaining within international institutions, short of formal bilateral and multilateral military alliances" (Paul 2005, 58; see also Layne 2006b, 8). Thus understood, soft balancing works by delegitimising the hegemon's policies (Paul 2005, 59),[57] so that the challenge posed by other states for the hegemon through soft balancing is, first and foremost, reputational in nature (cf. Pape 2005). It is a "strategic effort […] to increase

[56] Economic power may take the form of structuring markets to a state's advantage through, for instance, manipulating the exchange rate or via monetary and fiscal policies. A state may also resort to the use of positive and negative sanctions, where the former entails "actual or threatened rewards" and the latter pertains to "actual or threatened punishments" (Baldwin 1985, 20). The crux of both forms of sanctions is therefore "the manipulation of economic transactions for political purposes" (Nye 2011,71). However, it also pays to note that the use of economic power need not only be about improving one's relative position *vis-à-vis* other states, it can also be a way to seek absolute gains in cooperation with them. In this understanding, "economic […] [power] is deployed primarily to ensure a favorable external environment for developing the domestic economy" (Wigell 2016, 138). Feasibly, the state could also build up its economic capacity in expectation of a future need to resort to balancing in the military domain, a behaviour captured under the banner of "economic prebalancing" (Layne 2006b, 8–9).

[57] The term soft balancing is fraught with definitional *cul-de-sacs*. For present purposes, soft balancing is understood as a type of *delegitimation strategy* employed by a state (or an alliance of states) designed to render it more costly for another state (or an alliance of states) to translate its (or their) power capabilities into influence in international society. Some, however, limit soft balancing only to behaviour aimed at making it more difficult for a hegemon to engage in "aggressive unilateral military policies" through "nonmilitary tools" that include "international institutions, economic statecraft and diplomatic arrangements" (Pape 2005, 10). Yet others maintain that soft balancing is about "undermin[ing] the power of another state" regardless of the kinds of instruments utilised (even military ones), whereas hard balancing refers to "increase[ing] a state's own power" (He and Feng 2008, 371–72). These formulations, however, beg the question of what is inherently "soft" about soft balancing if the term is conflated to refer to a wide array of policy choices ranging from economic statecraft to arms transfers, which can be said to fall on the harder or more coercive end of the power spectrum (cf. Nye 2011, 20–22).

influence [not stocks of power] vis-à-vis a stronger actor" (Kelley 2005, 154; emphasis added).[58]

Balancing strategies do not, however, exhaust the realm of possibility for other states. It is feasible that other states can resort to *blackmailing* the hegemon in order to extract support or concessions (Walt 2005, 115; Jesse *et al*. 2012, 13). Some of America's authoritarian allies, for example, have been adept at this strategy, insisting that the hegemon's support for democratisation in their country would breed chaos and bring to positions of leadership actors with whom the Americans would struggle to do business. Egypt's former dictator Hosni Mubarak perfected this into an artform (see Original Publication II below). Of course, it is also possible for other states' leaderships to merely ignore the hegemon's wishes if they calculate that it would deem the transgression insufficiently serious to warrant retaliation or be otherwise unwilling to commit resources to rectifying the situation (Walt 2005, 115–16; Jesse *et al*. 2012, 13). In the case of the United States, this has worked at times. For example, authoritarian states in Washington's good books may brutally put down protests in their countries, but meet only verbal tirades from the hegemon's leadership, or – as has occurred in the case of Abdelfattah Al-Sisi's regime in Egypt – a change of leadership in the White House allows them to "come in from the cold" (see Section 4.1 and Original Publication I). While fortune might at times favour the brave, the downside of such a strategy of *balking* is that costs of miscalculation could prove disastrous. Saddam Hussein certainly found this out the hard way when the US assembled an international coalition that responded by force to his invasion of Kuwait in 1991 (Yetiv 2004).

Especially in situations where the hegemon's international engagement is in a state of flux and the operational environment is marked by uncertainty, the hegemon's allies and partners might resort to *hedging* measures, effectively "pursuing opposing or contradictory actions as a means of minimizing or mitigating downside risks associated with one or the other action" (V. Jackson 2014, 333). A state formally committed to a military alliance might, for instance, maintain a larger than necessary conscript army to guard against the risk of defection by other alliance

[58] Even if the surface-level manifestation of soft balancing might be mere diplomatic wrangling, the (unexpected) implications for the hegemonic order can still be massive if, for instance, the hegemon's network of allies and partners is eroded in the process or novel alternative orders with competing normative frameworks begin to emerge as a result. As Cooley, Nexon and Ward (2019, 707) posit: "[W]e do not need to have significant balance-of-capabilities revisionism to unravel hegemonic orders. This means, in turn, that the use of non-military instruments to shape, perhaps even incrementally, the distribution of non-military international goods cannot be dismissed as mere 'diplomatic friction': the stakes can be very high when it comes to the politics of international order."

members. Hedging can be seen as indicative of an erosion of trust towards the hegemon (Keating and Ruzicka 2014), it undermines the "hegemonic bargain" that underpins allies' and partners' relationships with the leading state.[59] A similar dynamic is captured by the logic of "goods substitution". It is possible that in uncertain times other states endeavour to find alternative providers of the (public) goods that a hegemon would regularly supply – whether these be security guarantees, open channels of international trade, lending services or even the social recognition of status. They might opt to shift to another good provider or, in an effort to improve their position within the order, play the hegemon and the challenger(s) against each other to get a better "deal" from the incumbent (Cooley *et al*. 2015; Cooley and Nexon 2020). In any event, such processes entail other states altering their relationship to the hegemon, the order's institutions and parts of its normative architecture, leaving the hegemon with less followers, or at least less committed followers.

3.3.4.2 Relationship management and interstate trust

Given the broad array of options open to other states to contest the hegemon, it is clear that the leading state needs to habitually engage in active *relationship management* to forestall and manage such forays by its followers. As already laid out, the social understanding of power that underlies socio-institutional accounts of hegemony posits that credible threats of coercion as well as economic carrots and sticks are both costly and may serve as short-term panaceas. In addition, while it is abundantly clear that institutions present essential fora for cooperation, they do not exhaust the plethora of interactions a hegemon has with other states in the international arena. At this stage it is thus suitable to introduce the concept of *trust* into the discussion. Trust is a useful notion for unpacking a hegemon's relationships because it has both a social and relational connotation, and is integral to stable relationships in any society, also international society. For this reason, it is also the focus of Original Publication II of the current exposition (see also Section 4.2).

As Barbara Misztal (1996, 12) argues, trust is ubiquitous in social life, "essential for stable relationships, vital for the maintenance of cooperation, fundamental for exchange and necessary for even the most routine of everyday interactions". Whenever there is a time lapse between the exchange of benefits, as is the case for all forms of exchange barring simultaneous barter, some level of trust appears vital for transactions and cooperation to take place (Rathbun 2012, 11; Misztal 1996, 17). Therefore, the achievement of a trusting relationship between two actors always

[59] On the notion of "hegemonic bargain" see *e.g*. Ikenberry (2012, 207–16) and Mastanduno (2019, 490–92).

implies an "expectation of future reciprocity" (Rathbun 2011, 246), which also distinguishes trusting relationships from singular situational occurrences, such as bets (Booth and Wheeler 2007, 232; Hoffman 2002, 379). However, beyond acknowledging that a modicum of trust is necessary to create and sustain relationships under conditions of uncertainty, there is little agreement on the exact definition of the term. In the context of IR, it is useful to rely on a threefold typology of *rationalist*, *social constructivist* and *psychological* understandings of trust constructed by Ruzicka and Keating (2015; see also Haukkala, van de Wetering, and Vuorelma 2015; 2018) to elucidate the conceptual intricacies of the term.[60]

First, *rationalist* conceptualisations simply treat trust as a probability calculation regarding another actor's willingness to reciprocate cooperation in kind during strategic interactions, which take place under conditions of uncertainty (Kydd 2005b, 9). Trust is thus founded upon "the belief that one will not be harmed when one's interests are placed in the hands of others" (Rathbun 2011, 246), and this belief is formed on the basis of information collected during prior interactions (Kydd 2001, 801–2; Larson 1997, 720–22). The obvious critiques against the rationalist approach to trust are manifold. Because it relies on information regarding previous encounters, it obviously fails to explain how the two parties come to interact in the first place (Lebow 2017). The rationalist approach also conflates trust with mere risk-taking (Hoffman 2002, 380–81), and eschews the emotional grounding that is usually associated with real-life trusting relationship (Mercer 2005). Moreover, strategic trust hardly applies in situations where payoffs from cooperation accrue over a long period of time (Rathbun 2011) – as is often the case in multilateral institutions that comprise the hegemonic order (Ruggie 1992), but also when it comes to long-running alliance relations and partnerships.

Second, *social constructivist* accounts view trust as an inherently "social phenomenon dependent on the assessment that another actor will behave in ways that are consistent with normative expectations" (Adler and Barnett 1998, 46). Trustworthiness is tied to doing what is right – *i.e.* the expectation that an actor will pursue the appropriate and socially sanctioned as opposed to strategically expedient course of action. In this "fiduciary approach" to trust, the expectation that the other will engage in upstanding moral conduct, not "a willingness to gamble on the behaviour of others" is central to forging trusting relationships (Hoffman 2002, 381). Relatedly, constructivists also point out that trust springs from a "we-feeling", from friendship, from the possession of shared identities and positive identifications *vis-*

[60] The terms used herein follow Haukkala, van de Wetering and Vuorelma (2018), who have slightly stylised them to reflect categorisations often used in the IR discipline. Ruzicka and Keating (2015) speak of "trust as a rational choice calculation", "trust as a social phenomenon" and "trust as a psychological phenomenon".

à-vis the other party (Adler and Barnett 1998, 45–47; Weinhardt 2015, 31–33; Lebow 2013, 19–21). In social approaches, trust effectively becomes a positive identification bias that "stabilises expectations of cooperative behaviour against contradictory evidence" (Brugger 2015, 81). Moreover, such biases need not merely be held in the minds of individuals. They can also be held by social collectives as collective beliefs, narratives or discourses that contain ideas regarding the trustworthiness (or not) of another entity, be it a specific person, institution or corporate actor like the state (Legro 2000; Brugger 2015; Keating 2015).

Third, *psychological* approaches to trust stress the role of personal predispositions and emotions-based attachment as central to the ability to trust. As Deborah Welch Larson (1997, 717; emphasis added) points out, "[w]e form our expectations about other states as well as individuals from previous experience, as filtered through knowledge and inherent *mental biases*". While Brian Rathbun's (2011) account focuses on the generalised propensity of individuals to trust, others point out that trust necessitates both cognition and emotion (Booth and Wheeler 2007, 232; Weinhardt 2015, 33). To trust thus necessitates not merely the ability to rationalise, but also the ability to "empathise with [the other's] fear" (Booth and Wheeler 2007, 237). In this vein, trust is an emotional category entailing "generalizations about internal, enduring properties of an object that involve certainty beyond evidence" (Mercer 2005, 95). Mercer (*ibid*., 96) also points to a crucial link between emotion, identity and trust, where people are posited to care about groups to which they belong only if they attach "emotional significance" to them. This effectively ties together the constructivist and psychological accounts of trust.

Two additional points regarding trust in international relations must be borne in mind. First and foremost, it is obvious that trust can exist at various levels (of analysis) – the individual, organisational, societal – and this multi-layered nature of the concept makes studying trust in the international arena a complex exercise. There are also complex linkages across these levels. It is thus possible for *both* individuals and collectives to place trust in an individual leader, an institution, a social collective, or even a corporate actor like the hegemon (Keating 2015). Secondly, while considerable variance is possible between different trusting relationships, it is likewise evident that both the intensity and scope of (dis)trust can vary within a *particular* relationship. It is possible that actors trust strongly or weakly, *i.e.* grant the other party differing "amount[s] of discretion […] over their interests" (Hoffman 2002, 377). It is likewise entirely feasible that a trustor X trusts trustee Y to do Z, but this does not mean it trusts Y to do W (Juntunen and Pesu 2018). An ally can, for instance, trust the hegemon to act as a final guarantor of its security, but not trust it to refrain from doing it harm in the economic realm through the imposition of tariffs.

As a final point of conceptual clarification, it should be stressed that trust and *legitimacy* – the more prominent notion in socio-institutional literature on hegemony – are intimately interlinked, but they are not one and the same. To reiterate an earlier point, legitimacy connotes rightful rule by the hegemon in accordance with certain normative parameters that are, to a sufficient extent, mutually agreed upon between the hegemon and its followers. Trust, in turn, is a belief held by the follower regarding the trustworthiness of the hegemon, about its willingness to reciprocate trust. Depending on the conceptualisation of trust utilised, this belief is grounded on expectations about, for instance, the hegemon's interests, moral character, identity or emotional disposition(s). Both legitimacy and trust can thus be viewed as inherently norm-referential, but the former is a *reflection* of certain normative precepts while the latter connotes *expectations of performance* in accordance with said precepts (Kaina 2008).

This points to a *co-constitutive* relationship between the two concepts. On the one hand, it is feasible to expect that insofar as an actor (or an institution) upholds (or is upheld by) a set of norms that are deemed legitimate within a certain social constellation, others within that constellation will be willing to place their trust in said actor (or institution) – in this manner, legitimacy breeds trust. On the other hand, it is likewise feasible that an actor (or institution) that repeatedly disappoints expectations regarding upstanding conduct in accordance with certain normative precepts, effectively undermining trust in the process, will over time also spur questions whether said actor (or institution) still remains committed to those normative precepts – in this manner, the erosion of trust breeds the erosion of legitimacy (Kaina 2008; see also Weinhardt 2015, 33). Legitimate actors and institutions appear trustworthy, and *vice versa* (cf. Suchman 1995). The array of trusting international relationships thus function as crucial "microfoundations" for the broader legitimacy of the hegemon, of its leadership, of the institutions that underwrite its rule, and of the hegemonic order writ large.[61]

3.3.4.3 Trust and hegemony

Despite the obvious centrality of trust in cooperative endeavours, the concept of has not been much explored in studies on hegemony. This surely owes to the problem of grossly asymmetric power in what realists posit to be an anarchical international system. How could materially disadvantaged states put their faith – and ultimately also fate – in the hands of the hegemon, given that the stronger party might at any point violently subjugate them if it so wished (Mearsheimer 2001, 32). However, as

[61] On the notion of "microfoundations" in IR, see Kertzer (2017).

the above discussion has sought to illustrate, the international arena can also be understood differently, as a robust, institutionalised and rule-bounded social realm – and hegemony as a social relation of leadership within such a realm. In such a world, cooperation does not appear as a mere fleeting occurrence, and trust becomes a useful concept for analysing how a hegemon manages its relationships.

When it comes to studies exploring hegemony and trust, exceptions thus tend to prove the rule. In the rationalist tradition, Andrew Kydd (2005a) provides a refined argument regarding the hegemon's role as a public good provider. In opposition to accounts of benevolent and predatory hegemony – neither of which, in his view, provide much space for trust[62] – Kydd (*ibid*., 620) argues for a "hegemonic assurance perspective", wherein the hegemon engages in "overcoming multilateral mistrust problems" by persuading other states to opt for cooperation. However, in order to get others past the "tipping point" of cooperation, the hegemon must provide states with credible information about the cooperative intentions of other states and must also signal that it is willing to act as a guarantor of the cooperative endeavour. Success thus necessitates that other states *trust* the hegemon to both provide them with the correct information regarding the intentions of others and to act as a guarantor of the cooperative endeavour (*ibid*., 624–25).

This established link between trust and the provision of public goods has clear implications for the role of trust in the maintenance of the hegemonic order through the cultivation of relationships. If it is trust in the hegemon that allows other states to opt for cooperation in the first place, then inappropriate conduct by the hegemon that erodes trust decreases the willingness of others to cooperate *not only* with the hegemon, but *also* with each other. In this sense, trust-building and the erosion of trust will have first and second order effects on the maintenance of the hegemonic order.

The social constructivist approach to trust, privy to the normative and identitarian underpinnings of the concept, is particularly relevant when looking at the hegemon's relationships within mature alliance settings and close partnerships. In the literature it is commonplace to describe especially the transatlantic core of the hegemonic order as a *security community*, wherein "war or the threat of force to settle disputes within the region is unthinkable" (Ikenberry 2008, 7). The states that comprise the constellation "entertain dependable expectations of peaceful change"

62 In the case of benign/benevolent hegemony, the hegemon produces public goods "because it wants to", regardless of the fact that other states free ride. In the case of predatory hegemony, the hegemon forces others to cooperate with its designs, and relies on credible deterrence that is established through occasional displays of might – the operative term is fear. In neither case does trust factor into the equation (Kydd 2005a, 622–23).

(Adler and Barnett 1998, 34), and such expectations have over the years become embedded not only into the organisational and institutional fabrics between states, but also as collective ideas shared by domestic societies within these states (*ibid*., 37–48).

In security communities, states do not, therefore, merely share core *security interests*. Instead, the connections between them are well developed in the *economic realm*, engendering profound *interdependencies* between markets. This confluence is further propped up by a commitment to shared *institutions and norms*. In their most mature manifestations, such security communities are marked by the emergence of shared *identities* across constituent societies (Ikenberry 2008; Risse 2008; 2016). In such communities, socialisation between the hegemon and follower states is no longer merely a matter of elite-level consent, consensus and interpersonal trust, but has an entrenched inter-societal dimension. At the same time, the constituencies which the hegemon must address in order to foster trust and maintain legitimacy of the hegemonic order have broadened to encompass more substantial subsets of the populations of these follower states.

In the psychological tradition, Brian Rathbun (2011) provides another rare account that explicitly ties together trust and hegemony. He explains American support for multilateral endeavours after the two world wars by looking at the psychological inclinations of decisionmakers, whether they are "generalised trusters" or "generalised distrusters", *i.e.* whether they deem others as generally trustworthy or untrustworthy. In his analysis, generalised trust "facilitates the diffuse reciprocity" required in interactions that occur over a long period of time, and constitutes "a form of 'social capital' [that] promotes cooperation even in highly uncertain situations deemed inhospitable to collaboration by rationalism" (*ibid*., 250). Rathbun (*ibid*.) thus effectively ties US support for constructing core institutions of the hegemonic order – particularly the United Nations – to the first image, to intrinsic and innate inclinations of key policy actors that predispose them to either trust or distrust others.

Psychological accounts thus bring the interpersonal and innate nature of trust to the fore, stressing the role played by individual policymakers in breaking out of spirals of mis/distrust based on their willingness to take a leap of faith (Booth and Wheeler 2007; Wheeler 2013). From this vantage point, it appears that individual agency is vital in any transformation of antagonistic relationships that a hegemon, or any other state for that matter, has with another state. Such "diplomatic transformations" necessitate trust, the willingness to put oneself in the other's shoes, and entail a process whereby:

> key decision-makers no longer impute malevolent motives and intentions to an adversary (now in the process of becoming a former adversary); decision-makers

> on both sides recognize the role that their past actions have played in making the other side fearful and insecure; and there is reciprocation […] of any cooperative moves that promote mutual reassurance (Wheeler 2013, 480).

Of course, there is nothing in the formulation to say that the process could not either break apart or even work in the reverse, where entrenched trust is undermined and ultimately broken by a series of antagonistic moves (Pesu and Sinkkonen 2019). On the other hand, the link between trust, emotions and identity speaks to the inherent "irrationality" of in-group and out-group biases, and underlines the profound difficulties of achieving such transformations (Mercer 2005; see also Larson 1997) – just think of the US-Iran or US-North Korea relationships.

3.3.5 Trappings of hegemony: linking norms, institutions and relationships

As already pointed out, the hegemon's material preponderance tends to be most profound at foundational order-building moments, which usually occur after ruptures in the international system. At such ruptures – as the materially preponderant state – the (future) hegemon has considerable discretion in setting up the institutions that it endeavours to utilise as a means to create and maintain order (Ikenberry 2001; 2019; Kitchen and Cox 2019). Invariably, these institutions are, to a considerable extent, a function of the *intrinsic* attributes of the hegemon, "derivative of the metropole's domestic order" (Kupchan 2014, 225; see also Ruggie 1992, 592–93). The material, intrinsic and socio-institutional images of hegemony are thus interlinked.

Such reproduction of features of the hegemon's polity on the level of the international order is feasibly a function of normative preferences as well as self-interest (cf. March and Olsen 1998). We can expect the hegemon to regard the norms and institutions that govern its domestic order as appropriate not only for itself but also for others in the international arena. Nevertheless, the entrenchment of the hegemonic state's norms beyond the metropole is also likely to work to the material advantage of the hegemon (Kupchan 2014, 226), as "power multipliers". Temporally-bounded collections of ideas – not just the distribution of material power – thus give a hegemonic order its form, and also shape the nature of relationships between the order's constituent parts. To reiterate, this is not to say that components of a hegemonic order could not be renegotiated or changed, or that follower states would have no role in this process. It merely serves to stress that modes of hegemonic ordering are products of their time and that the identity of the hegemon inevitably plays a major role in defining the normative parameters of order.

As per Charles A. Kupchan (2014, 221), we can thus expect each hegemonic order to have a distinctive "anatomy of order-producing norms". These norms are

central building blocks of the hegemonic order, constitutive of the *vision of hegemonic ordering* that the leader espouses. By looking at different hierarchical systems through history, Kupchan (*ibid*.) has mapped out considerable historical variance when it comes to how the leading state: (i) sets up its relationships with others in the order ("geopolitical logic"), (ii) replicates its domestic hierarchies within the hegemonic order ("socioeconomic logic"), (iii) deals with cultural characteristics ("cultural logic"), and (iv) builds economic order ("commercial logic").[63]

To illustrate, the Ottoman empire was a "hub-and-spoke" system wherein adversaries were subjugated to the core's rule and the "rigid socioeconomic hierarchy" of the centre was replicated throughout the order. The Islamic faith also played a central role, but other religions were tolerated within the empire. Commerce remained under tight imperial control (Kupchan 2014, 231–34). Imperial China, in turn, relied on "concentric circles of control" around the imperial centre. The tributary system replicated China's internal hierarchies within the order by stratifying other states in terms of both their geographical and cultural proximity to the centre – especially when it came to their espousal of Confucian ideals. A centralised brand of mercantilism allowed some possibilities for free enterprise (*ibid*., 234–40; see also Womack 2012). British hegemony, in part due to its reliance on the maritime domain, was undergirded by "horizontal linkages" between different peripheral nodes (Kupchan 2014, 241–42), while London's chosen approach to the European continent was to act as a balancer (Kissinger 2014, 32–33, 67). The transplantation of the class system throughout the empire was coupled with a universalist ambition to spread British culture across the globe, while the commitment to establishing a "liberal trading order" actually laid down scaffolding for America's hegemonic ascendancy (Kupchan 2014, 243–46; see also Ruggie 1992, 580–82; Schake 2017).

Like these orders of the past, the US-led hegemonic order has had its distinctive defining traits. Notably, it has been underpinned by geographically disparate logics of ordering in different regions (Kupchan 2014, 246–248; Nexon and Wright 2007, 266–68; Ikenberry 2012, 66). One way of fathoming this hybridity is to think of

[63] This compares to Ikenberry's (2012) conceptualisation of logics of ordering. He posits that international orders can be sustained through three different logics: *balance*, *command* and *consent*. The first logic dominates in the bipolar or multipolar orders theorised at length by structural realists, where the climate of fear intrinsic to international anarchy drives states to escape domination by balancing against each other (see Sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 above). The second pertains to hierarchical relationships, wherein a powerful a state uses coercion grounded on its material capabilities to dominate others in the system. In the third, as already discussed at length, "state power is embedded in a system of rules and institutions" (*ibid*., 61–62).

American hegemony as "a two-zone structure of hegemonic preponderance: requiring consensual acquiescence and common elite interests among its principal Cold War partners but less constrained with respect to clients on the periphery" (Maier 2003, 5). American hegemony in practice thus implies a hybrid amalgamation, it "relies on heterogeneous and asymmetric bargains that implicate American foreign policy in the domestic politics of multiple peripheries in very complex ways" (Cooley and Nexon 2013, 1044).

It is common in the relevant literature to make a conceptual distinction between hegemonic and imperial orders. An empire, simply put, is a "hierarchical order" marked by "organized rule over several dispersed weaker and secondary polities" (Ikenberry 2012, 67). It is a "hub-and-spoke system" wherein "core authorities occupy a brokerage position between local intermediaries and aggregate peripheries […] [, which] gives them a substantial advantage in terms of power and influence" (Nexon and Wright 2007, 260). In an imperial system, peripheral polities thus effectively forfeit their sovereignty to the core as the empire limits interaction between them. The control that the centre exerts can be direct or indirect, carried out either by local intermediaries (co-opted elites) or colonial authorities (Ikenberry 2012, 69). The relations between the core and different peripheries that comprise the imperial system are thus marked by "heterogeneous contracting", it entails varying bilateral arrangements with peripheral actors (Nexon and Wright 2007, 260; cf. Hurrell 2007, 267–73).

The key point to appreciate for present purposes is that although American hegemony as discussed here has imperial attributes to different degrees in disparate regions, it falls short of an empire in the traditional sense because it does not control the domestic politics of the peripheries to a sufficient extent (Cooley and Nexon 2013). Although the US might present varying constraints upon the relations of follower states to each other, these are qualitatively mild in comparison to those imposed by empires past (see only the comparisons in Kupchan 2014). As German analyst Josef Joffe (2001) has put it: "America is a hegemon different from all its predecessors. America annoys and antagonizes, but it does not conquer".

As was the case with past hierarchical orders, the socioeconomic, cultural and commercial characteristics of US hegemony link up to unit-level attributes. These encompass the above-described notions of American exceptionalism and the American Creed (see Section 2.1), as well as the commitment to the "open door" (Layne 2006a; see Section 3.2.4). It also pays to recall that such fluctuation cannot be dissociated from internal debates over America's (hegemonic) engagement with the world (see only Dueck 2006; Sestanovich 2014; Layne 2006a; Nau 2002; Section 3.2.4. above). As already argued at length, America's hegemonic vision in the post-World War II world has been underpinned by an aspiration to create "an egalitarian socioeconomic order" at home and abroad, one meritocratic and devoid of class

hierarchies. Missionary exceptionalism – essentially a Wilsonian brand of cultural universalism – has undergirded the promotion of freedom, democracy and self-determination. Moreover, a commitment to fostering free markets and open trade have also been central to the American hegemonic vision (Kupchan 2014, 248–51; see also Section 2.2). This, again, is not to say that the US has always behaved virtuously in defence of these idea(l)s (cf. Finnemore 2009; Cronin 2001; Dueck 2006; Sinkkonen 2015), but merely to underline that such identitarian underpinnings, visionary but not always or uniformly realised normative precepts, constitute America's hegemonic attainment and duly set the US and its hegemonic order apart from previous and likely also future hegemonic orders.

By implication, the extent to which the American hegemon has been willing to impose its preferred norms upon other states, even at times impinging upon their sovereignty, has fluctuated through time and differed across regions and between relational dyads. As with many conceptual constructs used to describe real-world phenomena, hegemony is therefore a matter of degree (Layne 2006b, 11–12), and it can assume different forms temporally as well as spatially. In addition, as already argued, the architectural and infrastructural attributes of particular hegemonic orders develop through dynamic processes of (re)negotiation where old conceptions regarding the normative building blocks of order are de- and re-legitimised, and new ones formed. We can thus expect differing levels of institutionalisation, normative fit, and density of links between the hegemon and its followers in different (regional) subsets of the order (Prys and Robel 2011, 267–71).

The above discussion has so far sought to illustrate that there can be considerable temporal and spatial variance when it comes to hegemonic architecture (the order's normative groundings), hegemonic infrastructure (the pervasiveness and nature of linkages between the hegemon and its potential followers) as well as the depth and breadth of institutionalisation. Whenever we speak of "hegemonic order", then, we are really referring to "a rich array of relations and articulated roles and evolving identities, which give hegemony its life and operation" (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019, 421). For present purposes, a comparison between what can be termed *consensual hegemony* turned security community within the transatlantic space (Maier 1977; Ikenberry 2008; Risse 2016), on the one hand, and opting for "authoritarian stability" (Cook 2012, 250) and "hegemony by proxy" in the Middle East, on the other, is particularly telling. This swift regional comparison merely serves to illustrate the multifaceted nature of both the *reciprocal institutional bargains* and *relationships* that comprise the US-led hegemonic order.

In the transatlantic arena, the *consensual-hegemonic bargain* reached between the US and its growing pool of European allies and partners has become deeply entrenched in terms of hegemonic *architecture* (norms and values), *infrastructure* (interactions and relationships), as well as the institutional forms within which these

are embedded. It is effectively a "liberal security community of democratic states" defined by shared security interests, economic and other interdependencies that pervade national boundaries, as well as common institutions and a broadly shared democratic identity (Risse 2008; 2016; see also Section 3.3.4.3 above). The transatlantic order is also thickly institutionalised, most obviously through NATO in the security domain, but also through US support – at least until the current administration – for the European integration project. The ties between constituent states also cut across their societies whether in the form of pervasive business relationships, educational exchanges or tourism. Normative preferences regarding enjoyment of freedom(s), indispensability of human rights, commitment to the rule of law and the virtues of democratic governance are sufficiently shared across the transatlantic space to speak of a shared, although not unproblematically congruent, value base (Salonius-Pasternak and Aaltola 2018; Wallace 2016). Therefore, in the transatlantic arena the initial bargain has for all intents and purposes metamorphosed into a community on multiple levels, pervading its constituent societies and breeding trusting relations.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region poses a stark contrast to the transatlantic space when it comes to hegemonic architecture and infrastructure, and their concomitant institutional moorings. Throughout the Cold War years, US involvement in the area was premised on containing Soviet influence and Arab nationalism, maintaining the steady flow of oil to global markets and propping up the security of its most important regional ally, namely Israel (Hudson 1996; Miller 2009). The US managed to co-opt support from the ruling elites of key regional *lynchpin states*,[64] notably Egypt, Iran (until 1979), Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which it deemed vital for maintaining order in the area and catered for its regional designs (Hudson 1996).[65] The liberation of Kuwait in 1991 brought a more elaborate American military presence to the region, but the bet on authoritarian regimes as conduits of regional stability persisted until the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which led to attempts to reorient America's approach. In the auspices of the Bush administration this entailed a commitment to the "Freedom Agenda", which had

64 For Mastanduno (2019, 487), "'lynchpin' states" are "secondary actors […] vital to the hegemon's effort to hold its overall order in place and assure that it moves forward". In other words, they are "indispensable" for the hegemon's efforts of order maintenance (*ibid*.). Feasibly, and for present purposes, such lynchpins can exist on various levels of the hegemonic order – global, regional, even sub-regional.

65 Especially after the fall of Shah in Iran in the midst of the 1979 Revolution, the US became increasingly concerned with the economic prospects of the Arab populaces and sought to instil regional stability by pressing local regimes for reforms under the stewardship of the IMF and the World bank. This approach, however, did not contain an explicit democratising rationale (Halabi 2009, 92–95).

different implications for America's partner regimes and allotted enemies. During the Obama presidency, especially after the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, there was a drive to foster "long-term stability" grounded on the realisation of freedom for the region's populaces (see *e.g.* Cook 2012; Ashford 2018; Perthes and Maull 2018; Gerges 2013; Hassan 2013). Despite such forays, unlike in the transatlantic space, linkages between the hegemon and the Middle Eastern periphery do not cut prominently across the constituent societies; for all intents and purposes they remain confined to the level of political, military and business elites (Halabi 2009, 11–14, 134; cf. Gause III 2019).[66] By initially tying itself to this approach of "hegemony by proxy", the US gradually managed to alienate the region's populaces (Halabi 2009; see also Telhami 2013; Lynch 2007; Gerges 2013). As will be argued in Original Publications I and II (see also Sections 4.1. and 4.2.), any consensuality or legitimacy in the hegemonic bargain, not to mention fostering of trusting relations, has remained limited to the level of ruling elites.

###

To sum up the above discussion, a core insight of socio-institutional accounts of hegemony is that the maintenance of international order by a singular hegemon necessitates conduct that does not *exceedingly* deviate from the normative parameters of the order in question. In short, the leading state's hegemony depends on the sustainability and adaptability of the prevailing order, which entails *both* the nurturing of *norms* and *institutions* and the management of *relationships*. Should the hegemon undertake revisionist behaviour that undermines the order's building blocks, or attempt to rewrite its rules unilaterally and without negotiation that will take into account the interests of followers, the hegemon may actually *both* erode its standing *vis-à-vis* other actors within the order and simultaneously erode the order's longevity (Hurd 2007). In this vein, even as the most powerful custodians of international order "[h]egemons are not just order makers but also order takers" (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019, 399). Similarly, by acknowledging the relational, intersubjective and ideational nature of the international arena, the theorist can fathom how the order that the hegemon creates is linked with both the internal attributes of the leading state itself, as well as the plethora of the hegemon's international relationships with other actors on the global arena. In this way, the material, intrinsic and social attributes of hegemony can come to interact in complex ways, and such interaction can also produce hegemonic failure in the long run.

66 Paradoxically, the Middle East itself has remained sparsely institutionalised, despite transboundary movements, ideologies and people having moved fluidly across the region throughout history (Malley 2019; Perthes and Maull 2018).

3.4 Dimensions of hegemonic failure in three images

At this stage it is time to tie together the insights attained in discussing the three images of hegemony and their possible interlinkages by considering how each of them might contribute to an understanding of hegemonic failure, to ascertain in which respects we could regard the US as a failing hegemon. The study will then duly segue into the original publications that provide four "snapshots" of hegemonic failure in the 21st century.

When it comes to the *material image* of hegemony, there appears to be a fair bit of agreement in the literature that American hegemony, when defined in terms of the possession of material capabilities and "the resultant ability to disproportionately affect others", is in decline and has been undergoing decline for a while already (Quinn 2011, 805; see also Section 2.3 above). This is where any shred of agreement stops, however. A small sampling of the disparate arguments should suffice to prove the point. [67]

On one side of the debate, even before the ascendancy of Donald Trump, authors of various theoretical stripes were ready to argue that US decline is for all intents and purposes irreversible. The international system is said to be moving – if it has not already moved – into a "post-hegemonic" age (Vezirgiannidou 2013), a world of "multiplexity" (Acharya 2017), a "no-one's world" marked by "multiple modernities" (Kupchan 2012), or a "post-American world" (Zakaria 2011). One author argues that we should brace ourselves for the day "when China rules the world", effectively a new era of Chinese hegemony (Jacques 2009).

Some, in contrast, think it premature to spell the end of the "American Century" because, while the US might be less powerful in relative terms than it was say, twenty years ago, this is not necessarily so in absolute terms, or when one considers its soft power (Nye 2015). Yet others point out to the inherent cyclicality of American "declinism" and "hasbeenism" and forewarn against premature predictions of US demise because "the United States […] [remains] the default power, the country that occupies center stage because there is nobody else with the requisite power and purpose" (Joffe 2009, 31; see also 2018). Norrlof and Wohlforth (2019), in turn,

[67] A quick look at recent front covers of one of the leading policy-oriented journals in the field in the United States, *Foreign Affairs*, provides a synoptic picture of how much ink is being spilled on the topic of American decline and the shifting tides of global power: *Come Home, America?* (2/2020), *What Happened to the American Century?* (4/2019), *Searching for a Strategy* (3/2019), *Who Will Run the World: America China and the Global Order* (1/2019), *Letting Go: Trump, America and the World* (2/2018), *Out of Order? The Future of the International System* (1/2017), *See America: Land of Decay and Dysfunction* (5/2014) (see: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/archive).

argue that it is rational for the United States to continue pursuing hegemony because of "complementarity" between the security and economic components of the hegemonic order.

There is also a further point of contention in realist circles over how to describe the emerging system. This turns on whether we are at present witnessing a shift in the international system to multipolarity marked by various competing centres of power (Layne 2011), or a new albeit different (contra Cold-War-era) form of bipolarity (Maher 2018). Another suggestion is a hybrid "1+y+x" world, where the US remains ascendant and China keeps rising but remains in second place in a class of its own, followed some way back by a constellation of other great powers (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, 68–71).

Beyond the cacophony, however, it appears that the material image of hegemony *per se* provides a rather automatic *longue durée* picture of the dynamics of hegemonic decline – the erosion in the hegemon's position is an inevitable fact of international life, and this is the case whether one takes her cue from proponents of the balance of power in the vein of Waltz (1979) or students of hegemonic stability and transition like Gilpin (1981; see also Levy 2015, 15). At some stage in a hegemon's life cycle, hegemonic decline and the concomitant loss of hegemonic status are inevitable, driven by law-like forces like the balance of power or the law of diminishing returns. Because of this apparent automaticity, it borders on the futile to look for hegemonic *failure* only within the material image of hegemony (although it is entirely feasible to look for hegemonic *decline*).

It is thus sufficient to note that at some point there will likely come a stage when the US, by virtue of decline in relative power capabilities, loses considerable chunks of its capacity to project power across the globe. In particular, this would entail gradually losing the ability to control the global commons and global flows that are essential to sustaining its hegemonic position.[68] In his account reviewing the so-called decline debate, Quinn (2011, 808; see also Layne 2011) thus finds

> that disagreement [between "declinists" and "anti-declinists"] may relate not to the fundamental question of the direction in which the United States' level of relative power is headed, but rather to the pace of its decline, perhaps even boiling down simply to what each side intuitively understands by 'a long time' and 'slowly'.

This is the case even if the literature provides too many answers to (re)count on when a hegemonic transition or a shift into multipolarity might occur (if it has not already

[68] On the importance of controlling "global flows", see Aaltola, Käpylä and Vuorisalo (2014).

occurred), based on what indicators (*e.g.* economic, military, technological, demographic) we might indeed ascertain that such a change has transpired, or what the implications might in the end be for the international system or the hitherto (liberal-)hegemonic order.[69]

Shifting to the *intrinsic image* allows for a more nuanced picture that leaves room for policy agency by the incumbent hegemon and its leadership, and therefore provides more space for reflections on what hegemonic failure might actually entail for a hegemon whose material fortunes are in the process of waning, however slowly. As already pointed out, there are various domestic attributes to hegemony, and thus manifold feasible pathways for the incumbent hegemon to effectively squander or fortify the foundations – material and otherwise – of its hegemonic position, various ways to accelerate or decelerate decline. Such factors can include manifest shortcomings in leadership, dysfunction in the formal and informal domestic institutions of the state, or public opinion dynamics, which, each in their own way, erode the bases of "usable power" (Trubowitz and Harris 2019). However, given the already established linkages between such factors, on the one hand, and ideas and foreign policy debates, on the other hand (see Section 3.2.4), it is useful to return to the hegemony equation proposed by Layne (2006a), where hegemony is not only seen as a function of power capabilities and systemic polarity, but also of *ambition* and *will*.

Of course, as should by now be clear, there is little agreement in the United States of today on the strategic and normative desirability of maintaining hegemonic purpose and harnessing power for such designs. Consider the inherent irreconcilability within the *prescriptive* debates on US grand strategy between offshore balancers/restrainers and deep engagement advocates.[70] Here – as already extrapolated at length (see Section 3.1.2) – differing predictions and theoretically (or even ideologically) influenced perceptions concerning changes in the material image are drawn upon to produce different policy proposals regarding the correct mixture of engagement and uncoupling when it comes to key regions of the globe, alliance commitments or international institutional fora.

To illustrate, for the former group, liberal hegemony is bleeding the superpower dry, so rightsizing is the answer if the US wants to retain its pride of place in the global power hierarchy. This effectively means being content with regional

69 Here the discussion by Quinn and Kitchen (2019) provides a concise up-to-date account of the debate.

70 Although most such debaters assume an assuredly capabilities-based understanding of power, all of these accounts link up to the intrinsic image of hegemony insofar as they are part of the ideational contestation that unfolds in the US over the future trajectory of policy.

hegemony in its own backyard, but retaining considerable capacity to project power across the globe in a prudent manner if the US so wishes. Anything more would be a *failure of overambition* and disregard emerging systemic constraints. For the latter, pulling back from current commitments appears irrational because the US is not declining as swiftly as the offshore balancers/restrainers would have it and, as William J. Burns's (2019) quote at the beginning of this exposition duly points out, has a few more decades to shape the world and entrench the gains made in constructing the US-led hegemonic order. This would be done in expectation of a gradual shift that still appears sufficiently far away on the horizon to allow for corrective measures. Anything less would be a manifest *failure of will*.

The disagreement is thus over what constitutes failure on the part of the hegemon, retrenching in the face of changing structural realities *or* sticking to the pursuit of liberal hegemony. Here restraint advocates and offshore balancers lament the ideational orthodoxies that supposedly dominate and skew US foreign policy. In their view, this apparent consensus has led the US to overplay its hand in the post-Cold War era, whether through NATO enlargement or overzealous interventions in the MENA region (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016; Walt 2018a; Posen 2013; see also Wertheim 2020; Allison 2020; Lind and Press 2020). Meanwhile, proponents of deep engagement assert that for better or worse it remains "the devil we know" (Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth 2012, 10; see also Brands 2015; Wright 2020a). Any decision by the United States to pull back substantially from its global posture could lead to more problems than it would solve. Through such positioning, the contending positions in the grand strategy debate filter the systemic imperatives of the international system into the domestic ideational domain, and this occurs in keeping with the theoretical (even ideological) presuppositions of the debaters.[71]

In light of these musings, how could hegemonic failure spring from such a climate of ideational contestation over the direction of the leading state's global engagement, which is being exacerbated by the impending power transition in the material domain? Such failure could, on the one hand, entail a manifest inability by the United States' foreign policy leadership to articulate and implement an expedient policy course fit for the current times. On the other hand, failure could take the shape of muddling through, either by default or design. The US would be unable or unwilling to craft any (more or less) coherent policy course at all. In this manner, the

[71] One advocate of retaining America's current global engagements thinks the tides have actually begun to shift in the ideational domain. In his view, the most *coherent* grand-strategic alternative for the US is no longer offered by the foreign policy establishment with its supposedly consensus-driven liberal-internationalist approach to the world, it is instead being articulated by the offshore balancing/restraint camp (Wright 2020a, 10).

intensity of ideational wrangling currently unfolding in the United States over foreign policy trajectory thus underlines the role of the policymakers and elites in a dual sense. They *partake* in these very same debates when they formulate and implement policy, and – as embedded actors – they *draw upon* these discourses for policy guidance. This two-way process, and how it might possibly constitute hegemonic failure, is the topic of Original Publication IV (see also Section 4.4), which ties American traditions of foreign policy thought to the emergence of the "Trump doctrine". It is an evolving approach that looks to inform US global engagement and, by implication, America's hegemonic role in the 21st century. In fact, this may yet be the case regardless of the fate of the incumbent in the 2020 presidential election. Neither the underlying structural and identity-political currents that drove Trump's ascendancy, nor the ideas that have informed the international engagement of the administration, will miraculously disappear overnight.

In the *socio-institutional image*, the hegemony equation becomes more complicated still. Hegemony is no longer a function of capabilities, polarity, will and ambition. Instead, quintessentially social factors – in the present exposition captured by the concepts *legitimacy* and *trust* – pertaining to both the institutions of the hegemonic order and the hegemon *per se*, come to the fore. In addition, the role of other states, whether followers or challengers, in the sustainability of the hegemonic order is magnified.

Introducing these considerations into the discussion opens up a more complex picture of hegemonic failure. The first issue is whether or not it even matters if the hegemon "fails" or even disappears altogether. In other words, to what extent can the order midwifed and sustained by a hegemon continue to flourish without the leading state assuming the burdens and responsibilities of hegemony? Can the phenomena of power transition and order transition be decoupled? Keohane (1984), in his seminal work *After Hegemony*, answered in the affirmative, with the caveat that cooperation without the presence of a hegemon is difficult to achieve even if demand for collaboration may in fact increase in certain sectors (or "regimes") of the order when hegemony subsides. However, there still exist conditions under which even rational self-interested actors will opt for cooperative forays, chiefly because "[i]nstitutions […] provide information and reduce the costs of transactions that are consistent with their injunctions, thus facilitating interstate agreements and their decentralized enforcement" (*ibid*., 246).

More recently, Ikenberry (2018a; 2018b) has stressed the potential longevity of the American-led order despite the incumbent hegemon's declining relative power, and even the recent erosion in its willingness to lead in a manner befitting a legitimate hegemon – an issue that has most certainly been exacerbated during the Trump presidency. On the one hand, he points to the order's complexity, and argues that the "United States does not *embody* the international order; it has a relationship

with it" (Ikenberry 2018b, 20; emphasis added). On the other hand, the order also has certain in-built strengths, or "self-reinforcing characteristics" that make it resilient: it is "relatively easy for states to join", its institutions grant states possibilities "for leadership and shared authority", "economic gains from participation […] are widely shared", and the "order accommodates a diversity of models and strategies of growth and development" (*ibid*., 24–25). America's potential challengers, especially China, having benefited enormously in economic terms from engagement in the order, can thus simply embrace parts of it selectively instead of seeking to overthrow it altogether (Tang 2018).

At the same time, though, Ikenberry (2018a) admits that the order is grappling with two crises, both stemming – rather counterintuitively – from its *success* after the Cold War. On the one hand, having expanded to encompass a more diverse group of stakeholders the liberal international order is facing a "crisis of governance and authority", seeing as it is no longer a solely US- or Western-led edifice. On the other hand, as globalisation has galloped apace especially in the economic domain, the sense of community within the order's Western core has been diluted, and a sense of economic insecurity has taken hold in portions of these states' populaces – effectively a "crisis of legitimacy and social purpose" (*ibid*., 18–21). Moving forward, Ikenberry (*ibid*., 10–11) views the order's future as *either* a "thick" one comprising chiefly liberal democratic states or a "thin" one with broader participation, built around solving large-scale global problems (*e.g.* pandemics or the climate crisis) through rules-based cooperation. Joseph S. Nye (2019a, 74) agrees with the latter prognosis and argues that it might be better to refrain from using "the terms 'liberal' and 'American' altogether and refer instead to the prospects of an 'open international order' or a 'rules-based order'".

Despite such sobering reflections, both authors see space for policy agency on the part of the materially declining hegemon. Ikenberry (2018a, 23) implores the US and other liberal democracies to get their act together to save the order, to steer it in a desirable direction, by "recaptur[ing] their progressive political orientation" and co-opting democratising states in the developing world "to cooperate within a reformed liberal order". Thence, "the [liberal-hegemonic?] master narrative of the last 70 years" can be recovered (Ikenberry 2017, 8). Nye (2019a, 80), similarly, proposes reorienting "American exceptionalism […] [towards] sharing the provision of global public goods, particularly those that require the exercise of 'power with' others". To do anything less would be tantamount to failure on the part of the hegemon.

Charles Kupchan (2012), in turn, sees an impending emergence of a "no one's world", where competing power blocs and ideologically infused visions of modernity vie for ascendancy. In such a world, the best the US and the West can thus hope for is to

> help deliver to the rest of the world what it brought to itself several centuries ago – political and ideological tolerance coupled with economic dynamism – then the global turn will mark not a dark era of ideological contention and geopolitical rivalry, but one in which diversity and pluralism lay the foundation for an era of global comity (*ibid*., 205).

The custodians of the waning order must therefore exercise forbearance by scaling down ambition when it comes to democracy promotion, and instead opt for "responsible governance", accept other countries' sovereign prerogatives, refashion organisations of global governance to account for both "representation" and "efficiency", and grant more discretion to regional organisations to facilitate governance. In the case of the hegemon, this should include refashioning the domestic narrative from one of American indispensability to modesty, while remaining mindful of the new reality of "great-power rivalry" (*ibid*., 187–204).

In a somewhat similar vein, Amitav Acharya (2017, 272) speaks of "a 'multiplex world' in which elements of the liberal order survive, but are subsumed in a complex of multiple, crosscutting international orders". The processes of erosion in the foundations of the American-led order – including slow-down in global trade, decreasing support for globalisation especially in the West, proliferation of inter- and transnational arrangements no longer controlled by the US, backsliding in democracy globally and within the Western core, as well as questioning of liberal values – have been afoot for long. Donald Trump's extraordinary presidency is merely an accelerant of such processes (*ibid*., 272–74). However, the paradox is that the rising powers who are supposed to challenge the US to lead the 21st century, including China as the most formidable candidate, have their own problems to deal with and are unlikely – at least in the short to medium term – to be able to assume the reins.[72] Per Acharya (*ibid*., 282), a functioning order in a world of multiplexity would entail more equitable and inclusive global governance, namely, less free-riding on the US, especially by Washington's Western allies, a willingness on the part of the West to work with "rising and regional powers", cross-cutting cooperation between organisations operating on global and regional levels, and engagement of transnational actors. Most importantly, America and its allies would need to rescind old privileges in the institutions of global governance in order to achieve buy-in from the rising powers.

[72] Mark N. Katz (2017) has expertly mapped these issues. Examples include China's declining demographic prospects and potential for prompting other regional powers to balance against it, India's ethnic tensions, as well as Russia's shrinking population and economic woes.

In light of these accounts, the ultimate failure for the US would be to forgo the role of what Etienne Balibar (2003) has called a "vanishing mediator".[73] Ideally, America's envisaged part would be that of a prudent declining hegemon, one that slowly transfers certain order-maintenance tasks to others (cf. Reich and Lebow 2014), all the while making sure that the scaffolding it has created will outlive the leader's ascendancy. This would work to the benefit of all partaking in the novel order, including the former hegemon. The difficulty, even "tragedy", here is that a declining incumbent will not necessarily be willing to think long- as opposed to short-term (Nye 2019a), and make the necessary adjustments in a timely manner, partly as a result of the above-described intrinsic pathologies. Kirshner (2019, 62), for instance, argues that hegemons are prone to a "fear/hubris paradox", which renders them "too arrogant to make concessions when they should [at the height of their power], and too frightened to make them when they must [when their power has declined and a challenge looms]".

Alongside such considerations, socio-institutional accounts of hegemony, with their focus on the ideational, paint a more complex picture of rise and decline dynamics between the incumbent hegemon and the rising challenger *per se*. One possibility is to turn to the "fit" or "divergence" between the worldviews, ideologies or identities of the declining incumbent hegemon and the challenger *vis-à-vis both* each other *and* other participants in the hegemonic order.

Henry R. Nau's (2002; 2011; 2012) work, for instance, grapples with the interaction between identity, ideology, worldviews and the balance of power. In his view, US foreign policy needs to be conceptualised so that relationships with states that share its identity – namely democratic states – are prioritised in anticipation of the fact that relationships with other states, those whose identity diverges from that of the hegemon, will by definition be more aloof or even antagonistic.[74] In this understanding, diverging worldviews, not merely fluctuation in material capabilities, militate against the prospect of a *modus vivendi* between the US, China, and possibly

[73] According to Balibar (2003, 334), "The Vanishing Mediator […] is the figure […] of a transitory institution, force, community, or spiritual formation that creates the conditions for a new society and a new civilizational pattern – albeit in the horizon and vocabulary of the past – by rearranging the elements inherited from the very institution that has to be overcome".

[74] It pays to note that aloofness and togetherness are not a function of physical distance. In her account of an approaching "multi-order world", Trine Flockhart (2016, 24) points out that as spatial detachment has become less of a hindrance for interconnections between states, emerging orders no longer necessitate geographical proximity; they can instead be built around shared "identity signifiers" between states that habit disparate regions of the world.

other rising powers.[75] A key insight of socio-institutional approaches to hegemony is thus that "[d]uring hegemonic transitions, great powers compete not just over the international pecking order, but also over the norms and rules that each power seeks to enforce internationally" (Kupchan 2014, 252).

In fact, many recent studies point to similar prognoses, where ideological competition is the new norm in a longer-term contest over the *normative parameters* of a future international order. Hal Brands (2018), for example, argues that the contest is one between democracy and authoritarianism – which he regards as relatively coherent worldviews held by the West, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other.

> Americans have also traditionally viewed autocracies as more aggressive and unpredictable than democracies: aggressive, because their coercive, illegitimate rule predisposes them to seek conflict and project their insecurities outward, and unpredictable, because a lack of transparency makes it hard to discern their intentions and capabilities. […] Russian and Chinese leaders believe, not inaccurately, that the political concepts America espouses are inherently threatening to the regimes and societies they wish to construct. (Brands 2018, 68)

In Brands's (*ibid*.) interpretation, this clash of ideologies suffuses great-power competition not only by working against the building of *trust* and potential for diplomatic compromise between the antagonists, but also by leading to fundamentally different *visions* regarding world order.

In terms of hegemony, a brief comment on China's vision seems relevant for current purposes, because it is clearly emerging as a "hegemonic reference point" for the United States (Brooks 2012, 37). The Chinese vision under Xi Jinping's leadership has recently been described as "multipolarity with Chinese characteristics". The approach is informed by ancient Chinese Tianxia ("all under heaven") thought and its modern repackaging as a "community of a common destiny for Mankind" – a notion included not only in Chinese foreign policy rhetoric, but also in the country's Constitution (Kallio 2018, 5). The onus is on a more equal (as in less US- and western-dominated) international order with respect for non-interference in the affairs of other nations. Crucially, in Jyrki Kallio's (*ibid*., 7; emphasis added) assessment:

[75] Here both Kupchan (2014) and Schake (2017) point to the importance of cultural congruence when it comes to peaceful hegemonic transitions, using the changing of the guard between the UK and the US as an example.

> China promotes *relativism* instead of *universalism*, so that it need not feel ideologically challenged. This means that there is increasingly an element of ideological competition in the relations between China and its perceived "West".

Taesuh Cha (2018, 409), similarly, sees a troubling clash between two exceptionalist visions of the world – the "American Dream" and the "China Dream" – and fears that "the two revolutionary states [US and China] are more likely to conflict with each other by unilaterally stressing their own standard of civilization than to solve international issues through peaceful processes of dialogue".

In a less pessimistic analysis, based on his reading of Chinese foreign policy debates, Shiping Tang (2018, 36–40) argues that China is content with a state-centric "Westphalian order with economic and financial globalization", and sees the need for cultivating extra-regional partnerships and an active role in East and Central Asia – something that the Belt and Road Initiative is an illustration of. This would mean that China only seeks "piecemeal modifications to the existing order" (*ibid*., 40), which would bode well for a peaceful transition to a less West-centric order. Randall Schweller (2018a) provides a related and intriguing counterpoint to alarmist voices, where the posited recent rise of nationalism in both countries need *not* necessarily pose an impediment to peaceful coexistence. As China's "outward-looking nationalism of expansion" (befitting a rising hegemon) meets Washington's "inward-looking nationalism of global retrenchment" (befitting a declining one), a pragmatic deal between the two powers becomes possible. However, for the time being at least, the increasingly negative narrative *vis-à-vis* China propagated not only by the Trump administration, but also developing on the US foreign policy analyst scene, the political elites across party lines and the American media space more broadly, undercuts such a prognosis (Breuer and Johnston 2019; Moore 2020).

On top of all this, despite America's relative decline, many students of the liberal international order regard the prospects of an alternative order built around a vision articulated by America's authoritarian hegemonic challengers as not particularly enticing for others in the international arena. Ikenberrry (2018a, 23) is categorical that neither China nor Russia, as "authoritarian capitalist states", "have a model that the rest of the world finds appealing". Nye (2013; 2019a, 73–74), similarly, points to the US soft power advantage *vis-à-vis* America's authoritarian challengers. Particularly, he points to how much of America's innate attractiveness is produced by (civil) society and does not, therefore, appear propagandistic or machinated – a critique which he levies towards the Chinese and Russian government-led attempts to foster soft power.

However, it is also possible that scholars immersed in researching the liberal hegemonic order at times possess a tendency to overestimate the intrinsic attractiveness of the order's building blocks and especially of the soft power and

inherent legitimacy of the hegemon (Keating and Kaczmarska 2019; Reus-Smit 2004a, 64–65; Reich and Lebow 2014, 33–34). This is particularly evident when it comes to how the attractiveness and legitimacy-producing potential of the alternatives being offered by authoritarian challengers China and Russia should be assessed. For instance, Callahan (2015; see also Gill 2020) argues that much of China's soft power messaging is not meant for an international audience, but instead crafted for domestic consumption as a way to create a negative image of the US and the West at large – in a manner of speaking constituting a "defensive" as opposed to "offensive" soft power strategy. Keating and Kaczmarska (2019), in turn, point to how Russia's "moral conservatism", "illiberal governance", "strong leadership" and its recent foreign policy forays in Ukraine and Syria, resonate not only in the non-Western world but also in right-wing and conservative circles in the West. The constituencies of legitimation for the challengers' order-building visions can thus be different from those traditionally targeted by the US.

Allan, Vucetic and Hopf (2018), in another take, argue that the stability of the liberal international order, and the longevity of US hegemony, is aided by the "distribution of identities" in the international arena. Expanding on Robert Cox's (1996) Gramsci-informed work on hegemony, they argue that in order to mount a successful challenge to the hegemonic order, the challenger must assemble "a counter-hegemonic coalition", through "both the delegitimation of the existing ideology and the formation of a new ideology that can attract followers" (Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf 2018, 854). However, in their assessment it is not sufficient for the challenger to co-opt the elites of other relevant actors – their focus is on the "great powers", namely Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, the UK and the US – but for the hegemonic ideology to also appeal to what they term the "lived daily common sense" of the masses in said states.[76] Allan, Vucetic and Hopf's (*ibid*., 857–64) findings, based on analysis of elite and popular discourses, point to broad elite-level support for what they deem to be the core tenets of the US-led order, namely democracy and neoliberalism, with Chinese elites being the only outlier. On the level of the masses, the support is more ambivalent for neoliberalism, but remains strong when it comes to democracy, and this they find to be the case even in China and Russia.

Yet, an outstanding issue still remains. Although such a distribution of identities across key states may indeed indicate entrenched support for the liberal international order and even American hegemony– and thus render it more difficult for an aspirant like China or a "spoiler" like Russia to challenge the current order – it is not abundantly clear why the focus of such an account should only be on the great (or

[76] On this Gramsci-informed reading, where any hegemonic project needs to be attuned to the everyday taken-for-granted common sense of the masses, see Hopf (2013).

even secondary) powers of the day. In fact, it is relatively easy to fathom other relevant cases to analyse in such a context, especially if we accept assessments regarding the increasing regionalisation and fragmentation of the international arena and recall that hegemonic ordering entails different ways of envisioning and maintaining hegemony in disparate regions through different relationships.

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In light of the above, the present study thus makes three central contributions to understanding socio-institutional aspects of hegemonic failure through Original Publications I, II and III (as already laid out, Original Publication IV focuses on potential failure through the intrinsic image of hegemony).

First, we should expect the articulation of a compelling hegemonic narrative to be a central component of the politics of legitimacy that pervades hegemonic ordering. Given the insight that hegemonic orders are not static creatures but require constant nurturing, *both* hegemonic maintenance by the incumbent and the mounting of (counter-)hegemonic challenges by the aspirant by definition entail the articulation of a vision of order. Moreover, as already posited, there is a utopian aspect to such visions. They tend to be aspirational so as to appeal to audiences both at home and abroad. To do this, the visions often assume a narrative form, they are effectively stories about order. It is likewise feasible that these visions may differ across the various regions and domains of the international arena in which the hegemon partakes. The first original publication of the exposition is concerned with such *order-building narratives vis-à-vis* the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, an area which has played an outsized role in the foreign policy forays of the US during the past two decades, first with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and then with the events and processes unleashed by the Arab Spring of 2011.

Second, and relatedly, many of the accounts described above provide a rather constricted view of the relevant relationships that the hegemon has with other states in the order. Descriptions of the US – the reigning liberal democratic hegemon – locked in an almost irreconcilable confrontation with authoritarian challengers effectively neglects to acknowledge that many of the states that make up America's vast global network of allies and partners are themselves autocratic. States like Saudi Arabia, Egypt or the United Arab Emirates are hardly poster children for democratic governance. Intuitively this means that their leaderships have not internalised the liberal norms that undergird the US-led hegemonic order,[77] which, as already pointed out, should make it more difficult for the US to establish trusting relationships with

[77] On processes of norm internalisation, see *e.g.* Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) and Risse and Sikkink (1999).

them. In addition, it pays to remember that the erosion of hegemony need not necessarily occur through a macro-level power transition from the incumbent to the challenger. It is possible that hegemony is hollowed out from below, when other states in the order engage in "goods substitution" by opting for goods provided by, for instance, the challenger as opposed to the incumbent. The rise of challengers for the hegemon means that there are more potential providers of such goods, which makes it ever more important for the US to remain a reliable supplier and tend to its vast network of alliances and partnerships.[78]

Yet, the scale of America's global network also means that the US is often forced to manage relationships with partner states that engage in unpleasant autocratic practices, and the hegemon is often stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place when it seeks to do so. Such is the case especially during periods of crisis or external shock, when transgressions tend to garner considerable public attention and scrutiny. Invariably, such *relationship management* opens up the hegemon to accusations of double standards and hypocrisy on domestic and international arenas alike, a process tantamount to hegemonic failure. Moreover, it is clear that in such cases, the hegemonic bargain has rarely been reached with the populaces of the partner state. Here hegemony is closer to an elite-socialisation model than a pervasive security community, or a result of the cultivation of "common-sensical" mass support for the hegemonic edifice. The second original publication of the exposition uses the lens of trust to pick apart the inherent dilemmas of managing such challenging partnerships, using the relationship between the United States and Egypt as an illustration.

Third, the norms, values and institutions that are constitutive of the hegemonic order are neither etched in stone forever nor amenable to simple definitional exercises – they are in and of themselves sites *of* and *for* contestation. It is by no means a given that there is a shared understanding of the normative building blocks of the order or their meaning, and such diverging understandings can also exist between (and even within) the core states that comprise the said order. The third original publication of the exposition seeks to tackle this complexity of the order's normative makeup with reference to perhaps the central signifier of the transatlantic community of values, namely *freedom*. The comparative exposition analyses the

[78] Norrlof and Wohlforth (2019) provide an apt illustration and discussion of the vast US security network, encompassing NATO, the Organisation of American States (OAS), and America's relationships with Australia, Japan, Pakistan, the Philippines and South Korea. They argue that "[t]he US security network is unmatched because of four characteristics: the scale of the US network; disproportionate US capability within the network; US centrality within the network (as measured by the number of US ties to other countries); and the structure of the network (as measured by other countries ties to the US and each other)" (*ibid*., 438).

freedom discourses of foreign-political elites in the US and the EU in the post-9/11 era. By doing so, it provides a useful testing ground, it allows us to pry into how congruencies and dissimilarities in the articulations of freedom between these actors in fact both connect and divide the two sides of the Atlantic.

4 Rereading the four essays on hegemonic failure

This chapter will conclude the study by providing synopses of the four original publications of the present exposition. The idea is not to simply summarise these four essays on US global engagement, but to contextualise them into the framework of the three images of hegemony,[79] and, in the process, tease out their relevant insights when it comes to assessing how the US has possibly "failed at hegemony". To reiterate, the publications delve into the dynamics of US hegemony by studying the hegemon's *narrated visions of order*, *relationship management vis-à-vis* an authoritarian partner, *values* in a comparative perspective within the hegemonic core, and *domestic ideational contestation* over US global engagement during the Trump presidency.

4.1 Original Publication I: Narrating a hegemonic vision of order

A key component of hegemonic leadership is the ability to articulate a vision of hegemonic order that is compelling for followers and domestic constituents alike, a vision that these "constituencies of legitimation" can buy into. In light of the insights of socio-institutional approaches to hegemony, such construction of persuasive hegemonic *narratives* should be regarded as a key aspect of the politics of *legitimacy* that pervades hegemonic order(ing). On the one hand, the production of hegemonic narratives is integral to the discursive contestation that the hegemon is engaged in on the international arena. On the other hand, in the domestic-political sphere, the production of a dominant hegemonic narrative by the state's leadership can help it prevail in the incessant wrangling that takes place over what it means (and whether

[79] The original publications can be found in full at the end of this dissertation. For complete elaboration of the ideas presented in the current chapter, along with the extensive reference apparatuses on the topics covered, please consult the respective original publications.

it is feasible) to be a hegemon, and how such a hegemon should conduct itself on the international arena or some subset of it.

The first original publication in the current exposition, a book chapter entitled "American Narratives of Order-Building in the Middle East: Dashed Visions on the Nile" (published 2020), thus starts from the relatively uncontroversial premise that the production of narratives is integral to the processes of legitimation that the hegemon is irredeemably engaged in. Narratives, as already laid out (see Section 3.3.3.5), are not descriptions of some objectively attainable reality, but instead serve as useful shorthands that help social actors deal with an inherently complex world, a world that is ultimately ungraspable in its totality. In this manner, narratives draw upon disparate social elements to (re)create and (re)constitute an imperfect reflection of "the world out there". Insofar as a hegemonic order is a social constellation – replete with values, norms, rules, institutions and practices that produce legitimacy for the order and authority for the leading state – the narratives that the hegemon constructs regarding that order become a valid topic for scholarly inquiry.

In short, the hegemon – or more aptly its political leadership – habitually engages in storytelling as it defends its preferred interpretation of order, envisages novel pathways that lead the hegemonic order (or some subset of it) from disorder to order, or plots a course from one incarnation of order to another. Order-building narratives are thus about constituting, legitimising and universalising a vision of order held by an actor. They are integral to hegemonic contestation, to attempts by the hegemon to make its particularistic vision of the world into a universally accepted one. To study order-building narratives, then, is to focus on the hegemon's policy discourse regarding the order's key "building blocks", *inter alia* articulations fathoming: how the order should be organised; who can legitimately take part; what the institutions of the order and their constituent norms and rules should be; through what means the order should be constructed and maintained; and what the order's ultimate objectives are.

In particular, the chapter tackles order-building narratives in the context of US engagement with one regional subset of the hegemonic order and one discreet relationship within this subset – in this sense it speaks to both the *architectural* and *infrastructural* features of the hegemonic order: to its norms and values, key relationships, and how these should ultimately be institutionalised. Specifically, the article explores how the US has constructed order-building narratives in its foreign policy discourse *vis-à-vis* the Middle East, in general, and the US-Egypt relationship, in particular, in the post-9/11 era, although more focus is reserved upon the Arab Spring of 2011 and its aftershocks.

It can be expected that such order-building narratives become particularly pertinent at moments when the international order – or some regional or thematic subset of it – is perceived to be undergoing a crisis. Arguably, the regional order in

the Middle East has been in such a state ever since the Bush administration made its fateful decision to invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein's regime, and it can most certainly be posited that the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 threw the regional order into an elongated period of crisis (Perthes and Maull 2018). The advent of the Trump presidency, in contrast, presents a different kind of rupture. Although the president's election was arguably a symptom of the broader challenges faced by America in the 21st century, both domestically and internationally, Trump has clearly catalysed a cycle of "crisis talk" when it comes to the sustainability of US global leadership, the liberal international order, and even the democratic institutions of the republic itself.

In political orders, crises exhibit the possibility of breakdown (a move from order to disorder), the prospect of transformation into a new type of order, or adaptation of some parameters of the old order (Ikenberry 2008, 3). Crises can thus be managed and need not by definition lead to either disintegration or violence, they also "imply the imperative, and hence the possibility, of remedial action" (Reus-Smit 2007, 166). Whether their source is internal or external, crises feasibly instil pressure upon actors – including the hegemon's policymakers – to rethink long-held ideational orthodoxies, which assume the form of collective ideas. Such notions are habitually held by the hegemon's policymaking elites and other relevant stakeholders regarding engagement on the international arena or some important sub-component of it. This is where order-building narratives become ever more important, as they provide a useful entryway for exploring how a hegemon perceives its role within the ever-evolving hegemonic order.

By exploring the foreign policy discourses of the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations – from official sources and the broader public (media) sphere – the chapter makes three key contributions regarding the administrations' order-building narratives, in particular, and the development of US hegemony in the MENA region, in general.

First, the chapter illustrates how, during the time period under scrutiny, the construction of order-building narratives *vis-à-vis* the Middle East in general, and Egypt more specifically, has been irredeemably linked to predominant ideas regarding American hegemony. These ideas populate the foreign policy making community in the United States, and thus factor prominently in American grand-strategic debates. They thus pertain to the intrinsic image of hegemony.

As already alluded to, it is possible to distinguish between a "thin" and "thick" understanding of liberal hegemony in American foreign policy thought (cf. Ikenberry 2015a; 2018a; Reus-Smit 2004a; Simpson 2004), where the former approach is more exemplarist and the latter more missionary in orientation. In the "thin" understanding, the role of the hegemon is to merely prop up the multilateral institutions that underpin the hegemonic order and take on the burdens of public good provision. As long as other states conduct themselves in the international arena

in accordance with the broadly accepted norms of said institutions and adhere to this "macro-level hegemonic bargain", the leading state sees little need to influence how states partaking in the order decide to organise their domestic polities. A *"thin" conception of liberal hegemony*, then, is *pluralistic* in the sense that the hegemon – barring some very extraordinary circumstances like use of force prohibited in the UN Charter – will not impinge upon the inalienable sovereign rights that follower states possess as members of international society.

A "*thicker" conception of liberal hegemony* entails qualifying criteria for what kinds of states can legitimately partake in the hegemonic order, placing emphasis on both international conduct and regime type. The realisation of human rights, adoption of democratic forms of government, adherence to the rule of law and good governance can thus function as (pre)requisites for inclusion in the hegemonic order. Flaunting these standards may, in turn, be used as grounds for exclusion or, *in extremis*, justification for enforced regime change. This conception of liberal hegemony is "anti-pluralistic" in that it requires follower states to replicate certain norms that the hegemon regards as essential within their domestic arenas, or risk sanctions, ostracism and even enforcement action. The relationship between the order-building narratives and these predominant ideas regarding US hegemony should be viewed as co-constitutive: dominant ideas regarding hegemony are drawn upon to construct order-building narratives which, in turn, serve to legitimise and reproduce those very ideas about America's hegemonic role.

Upon closer reflection, the visions that the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama sought to articulate *vis-à-vis* the MENA region were explicitly wedded to a "*thick" conception of liberal hegemony*. In the case of the Bush administration, this espousal entailed articulating a qualified reading of external sovereignty, particularly when it came to those states – Iraq and Iran – that the president branded as members of the "axis of evil". Regime type, and more specifically the manner in which a regime positioned itself *vis-à-vis* the United States, the hegemonic order and the core values of "democracy, development, free markets and free trade", would function as the prerequisite for legitimate membership of the regional order (Bush 2002). Commitment by regional actors to such principles would, so the logic went, ultimately transform the region into a space of stability, peace and prosperity (US Department of State 2008) – something that would serve both the interest-based and values-grounded aspirations of the American hegemon. Under the banner of the *Freedom Agenda*, the administration thus crafted a transformative order-building narrative, pledging to instil upon the region, by pre-emptive force if necessary, "a balance of power that favours freedom" (Bush 2002).

The commitment to a "thick" conception of liberal hegemony continued during Barack Obama's tenure. Initially the president's stated desire was to break free of the (in hindsight) misinformed approach of his predecessor. The new incumbent thus

sought to exorcise certain terms prevalent in Bush's War on Terror lexicon – like "terrorism" and "jihadism" – from America's foreign policy vocabulary and pledged to combat "violent extremism" instead. In the famed Cairo Speech of 2009, Obama vowed a new beginning with the region, exhibited humility for America's past mistakes by forswearing forcible regime change and swore to lead by example, co-opting regional states to work towards a better future for the region and its people. However, upon closer inspection, the Obama administration remained wedded to the core tenets of a "thick" understanding of liberal hegemony. The guarantee of a "stable, successful and secure" order in the long run would be the espousal of values like freedom, human rights, rule of law and transparency by regional regimes (Obama 2009). This was more than a normative claim; states committed to such values would also serve as more reliable partners for the US in the long run (Obama 2010). As the Arab Spring revolutions began in late 2010 and swiftly engulfed the region, the administration saw little need to rethink the premises of its order-building narrative. If anything, the revolutions initially confirmed the administration's previously-stated belief that the region's foundations risked "sinking into the sand" if its constituent states did not espouse America's promoted values and undertake requisite internal reforms (Clinton 2011).

Second, the chapter paints a picture of a change/continuity dynamic when it comes to US order-building narratives. On the one hand, profound continuities in order-building narratives can persist, even across very different presidential administrations. This speaks to the stickiness of entrenched collective ideas upon which narrative constructions are habitually grounded. The Bush and Obama examples illustrate that although we may expect fluctuations in order-building narratives in times of crisis – or situations that the actors involved are willing to frame as a crisis – profound change is not preordained. This is amply illustrated by the distinguishable continuity between the Bush and Obama administrations when it comes to their commitment to a "thick" vision of liberal hegemony. Moreover, continuity is also distinguishable when it comes to leaders' personal beliefs, even in the face of events that suggest such ideas may be misguided. To illustrate, for a significant time after the Arab Spring revolutions (at least until the *Thermidorian* reaction following the ousting of Egypt's first freely-elected president Mohamed Morsi in the summer of 2013), in his public statements President Obama clung to the teleological idea that despite travails and tribulations "the arc of history [bends] toward justice" (Obama 2011).

On the other hand, change is possible, and it can go well beyond the above-described minor fluctuation that is fathomable within a "thick" liberal-hegemonic frame exhibited by the different temperaments of the Bush and Obama teams. Although the chapter does not dwell extensively on the pre-9/11 US approach to the region, it is evident that the hubristic seizing of the "unipolar moment" in US foreign

policy circles during George W. Bush's tenure – replete with robust visions of liberal hegemony – was a profound departure from America's approach to the Middle East during the Cold War (see Section 3.3.5 above). Fast forward to today, Donald J. Trump's presidency is an example of an abrupt fissure, *especially* in the narrative domain, although the structural and agential forces that ultimately enabled this shift did not begin, nor are they likely to end, with the current incumbent of the White House.

The chapter thus makes the argument that Trump's order-building narrative has been constructed not on a liberal(-internationalist), but a *crudely* realist reading of America's hegemonic role in the Middle East. Some have even termed it *illiberal* hegemony (Posen 2018). Instead of summoning America's (and more broadly the proverbial West's) cherished values to the fore, the Trump administration has articulated a narrative of zero-sum great-power competition. The president has attacked, in rhetoric and practice, the foundational institutions of the US-led hegemonic order and raised the spectres of extremism and terrorism to the forefront of US foreign policy rhetoric – especially when it comes to America's regional foe Iran. In fact, the Trump administration has been forthright in its assessment that the US must downscale its expectations for a region where "neither democratic transformation nor disengagement" function as panaceas. Instead, the administration pledges to "promote stability and a balance of power that favors US interests", which it defines as eradicating jihadist terrorism, forestalling the rise of a hostile regional hegemon and ensuring the flow of energy to global markets (Trump 2017, 48). In this manner, the US vision for the Middle East travelled from George W. Bush's dream of a "balance of power in favour of freedom" to a circumscribed understanding of US interests in the span of less than two decades.

The *third* key contribution of the chapter pertains to the inherent discrepancy between the *order-building narratives* and *order-building practices* employed by the hegemon. This is where the focus of the chapter on Egypt as a country case becomes particularly illuminating. In short, although the US order-building narratives during the Bush and Obama eras postulated a direct link between the realisation of liberal-democratic norms within the states of the MENA region and the achievement of order, US policies *vis-à-vis* the region at large and especially towards its authoritarian ally Egypt were rarely in line with the narratives expounded by the hegemon's policymaking elites.

For the Bush administration, the brunt of the democratisation drive in the Freedom Agenda was ultimately reserved for America's regional foes, not allies. In the case of Egypt, the administration talked the talk – notably Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (2005) made the case for "freedom" and "democracy" at Cairo University – but implementation never went beyond piecemeal reforms aimed at economic restructuring and the holding of freer elections. Not only did the quagmire

in Iraq and the War on Terror ultimately consume much of the administration's energy, the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood candidates in the 2005 People's Assembly elections in Egypt served as a reminder that democratisation could benefit forces potentially harmful to US interests. By the end of its term, the Bush administration had reverted to a decades-old practice of betting on its established authoritarian allies to deliver regional stability, hegemony by proxy *sans* freedom.

For the Obama administration, faced first with the Arab Spring revolutions and then the re-establishment of authoritarian rule and breakdown of state structures across the region, the picture appeared more complex. Yet, the end result was similar. In the case of Egypt's January 25th, 2011 Revolution, the Obama team ultimately embraced the protesters' calls for change, albeit after some internal wrangling. It helped that the protest movements seemed to fit with the president's articulated view regarding the ability of human agency to alter the trajectory of history. However, while the US enunciated a narrative that linked order in the region to the cultivation of democracy, both its willingness to support such forays in practice, as well as ability to nudge Egypt's caretaker rulers in that direction proved insufficient. By the time the Morsi interregnum ended in a military takeover, subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and, ultimately, the election of Abdelfattah Al-Sisi to the presidency, the US again found itself betting on authoritarian stability.

This stark discrepancy between narrative and practice is doubly troubling. Political narratives – of which order-building narratives constitute a subset – are justificatory devices that policymakers employ to legitimise interests and identities and render particular sets of policies meaningful. In the case of the Middle East and Egypt, the American hegemon's leaderships spent considerable energy crafting narratives to justify an approach to the world that was never *really* implemented, or, at most, attempts to realise their visions for the region were haphazard. As already argued, a hegemon can withstand a modicum of such hypocrisy. In fact, it would be utterly foolish to imagine a hegemon able to fit its policies perfectly with the visionary aspects of its foreign policy (Brown 2001; Finnemore 2009). However, it would likewise be myopic to expect that blatant discrepancies in the stories a hegemon tells and the policies it conducts could go unnoticed by partners, foes or within the hegemon's domestic-political arena. This was certainly the case for both the George W. Bush and Obama presidencies.

The former's Freedom Agenda received a baffled reception from the region's strongmen – Mubarak included – and this is to say nothing of the international and ultimately also domestic outrage over the invasion and botched transition in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. For the latter, the reaction to the Arab Spring – and particularly the January 25th, 2011 Revolution – managed to anger America's regional allies, Mubarak-era holdovers, as well as the pro-democratic forces in the country. For the

first two, the US decision to support the protesters was a traitorous act; for the third the initial US reaction was slow and its concrete commitment to democratic transition insufficient, never in line with the transformative rhetoric. Domestically, Obama was initially blamed both for being overly apologetic when it came to pursuing US interests in the region and later for failing to capitalise on America's ability to press for democratic reform. Notably, neither the Bush nor Obama administration managed to convince the people of the MENA region that their policies were meant to empower, to reassure them of America's benign intentions.

With the Trump presidency, then, US engagement with the Middle East and North Africa region has arrived at a crossroad of sorts. Trump and his team have articulated a deceptively simple template. The US will forgo visions of democracy and human rights promotion in favour of stability achieved by co-opting authoritarian allies – it is a return to decades-old authoritarian stability in *both* word *and* deed. So long as they share America's preoccupation with combatting terrorism and checking Iran's influence, US partners can tend to their domestic gardens in whatever way they see fit. It appears that the Trump team has squared the proverbial circle by bringing America's order-building narrative into line with its policies. What is less clear, however, is how normatively desirable, let alone sustainable, this apparent "non-vision" will prove to be.

The last nineteen years of US engagement in the Middle East, then, attest to a dismal failure of hegemonic vision, a failure that has served to delegitimise US leadership and taint America's ability to pursue its interests in the region. Moreover, it is difficult to see how, in the present context, the US could offer up compelling future solutions for building order in the region – especially an order that would benefit a broader section of the region's populaces. The Trump presidency certainly has made no effort to articulate such a vision, having instead opted for a transactionalist approach that speaks to a more constricted understanding of America's regional role. For a hegemon, then, narratives built on imaginaries of omnipotence and pretensions of omniscience can indeed produce failure. They can prove detrimental in terms of influence and sustainable leadership, unless backed up by concrete policy achievements.

4.2 Original Publication II: Managing a hegemon's key relationship

As has already been argued at length above, hegemony can also be understood as an exercise in *relationship management*. The hegemon, in short, is not merely a tender of norms and institutions, it is also a manager of manifold qualitatively different bilateral relationships. The second original publication, a book chapter entitled "Understanding the trust–distrust nexus between the United States and Egypt"

(published 2018), deals with the difficulties that the US, as a hegemon, encounters when trying to manage its relationship with a regional lynchpin state undergoing a political crisis. It complements the first original publication by looking at the US-Egypt relationship. However, unlike the first study where the focus was on America's hegemonic vision, in this instance the analysis focuses on hegemon-to-lynchpin interaction, an integral part of the infrastructure of one regional subsection of the hegemonic order.

Within real-life hegemonic orders, defined by hybridity, the manner in which a hegemon interacts with other states can naturally vary enormously. In some dyads, the relationship is defined by mundanity, even indifference, while other relationships are vital for maintaining stability within the hegemonic order writ large, or some regional or thematic subset thereof. The US-Egypt relationship clearly fits into the latter category. Egypt's cooperation in America's regional designs remains paramount, not only in terms of keeping peace with Israel across the Sinai and waging the battle against terrorism, but also as a stabilising force in the broader regional constellation, which is increasingly marked by proliferating pockets of disarray.

At the same time, however, Egypt is sufficiently formidable a state to make it very difficult for the hegemon to impose its preferences upon, at least for any extended period of time. The US, unable to dictate, is forced to *manage* its relationship. At any rate, socio-institutional accounts of hegemony stress the need for the hegemon to render its rule sustainable not merely through credible threats or the use of carrots and sticks, but through established, institutionalised and well-functioning relationships. This is where the focus on trust provides a useful lens for exploring how hegemonic rule through relationships functions (and should function) in practice.

Trust theorising in the IR discipline to date has placed much focus on antagonistic relationships or, perhaps more aptly, on how such states may break out of cycles of mis/distrust (see *e.g.* Wheeler 2013; Larson 1997; Pursiainen and Matveeva 2016; Booth and Wheeler 2007). The current chapter, in contrast, zooms in on a relatively well-established relationship, which has nevertheless been periodically problematic from the standpoint of both the hegemon and the follower state. Moreover, in studies where trust has become a central concern of inquiry, it tends to have been approached (a) from the standpoint of interpersonal trust between leaders, (b) the states in the relationships have been treated as unitary anthropomorphised actors upon which human-like traits have been imposed, or (c) these two approaches have been conflated (cf. Wheeler 2013; Larson 1997; Kydd 2005b; Weinhardt 2015). The present study, in contrast, seeks to move beyond these

formulations. It makes a case for cracking open the black box of the state to account for trust as a multi-layered phenomenon in interstate relationships.

As already argued above, the crucial link between trust and hegemony remains underexplored in the extant IR literature. Indeed, this might be due, in part, to the still prevalent tendency in the discipline to focus on the material trappings of hegemony (see Section 3.1 above). Socio-institutional accounts of hegemony, in contrast, tend to focus on the construction of institutions and concomitant production of legitimate rule through said institutions instead of placing concerted attention upon how the hegemon manages its different relationships. Trust, a relational concept perhaps too easily associated with the "first image" of individual human beings, has been neglected in the process. In line with social theorising on hegemony, however, focusing on trust can add to our understanding of how the hegemon interacts, and should interact, with other states in the order.

The chapter thus starts out by introducing the three lenses through which trust has been conceptualised in the IR discipline. To recall, *rationalist* conceptualisations treat trust as a probability calculation regarding another actor's willingness to reciprocate cooperation under conditions of uncertainty. From this vantage point, trust is grounded upon a belief held by a rational actor regarding another side's trustworthiness, its willingness to reciprocate in kind within a strategic interaction. Second, *social constructivist* accounts consider trust to be a social phenomenon. On the one hand, such scholars tie trustworthiness to acting in accordance with normative expectations regarding what is right – *i.e.* the socially sanctioned as opposed to strategically expedient course of action. Upstanding conduct is thus central to forging trusting relationships. On the other hand, constructivists stress that trust springs from a "we-feeling", from shared identities and positive identification with the other. Third, *psychological* approaches to trust stress the centrality of emotions-based attachment for the ability to trust. In this vein, trust has both a cognitive and affective dimension, to trust necessitates the ability to have empathy for others' predicaments and apprehensions. These three lenses on trust are not *necessarily* mutually exclusive, but they do provide different viewpoints on the notion.

The chapter then lays out a *tripartite conceptual framework* to further unpack the role of trust in interstate relationships. It is argued that instead of focusing only on foreign policy *elites* as individual trust-builders through interpersonal relationships, it is essential to also pay attention to two further "levels of trust", the *organisational* and *societal*. This approach has the advantage of avoiding both anthropomorphism and the tendency to equate interstate trust with interpersonal trust that occurs between states' leaders.

The first of these levels, then, focuses on *interpersonal bonds* between relevant political leaders, whether these be heads of state, ministers or key military leaders. On this level, the *trustor*'s trust in the *trustee* can feasibly be chiefly strategic, where relationships are treated as solely functional exchanges. However, trust can also be grounded on expectations of norm-following, or have an emotional grounding, as, for instance, when people who are regarded as generally "good" are also deemed trustworthy. In interpersonal relations, trust is thus often a mixture of cognition and affect.

The second level ties trust to *organisations*, to the bureaucracies of states that are in charge of the day-to-day management of interstate relations. On this level, trust is embedded into the norms, rules and practices of said institutions and can be both strategic and identity-based in nature. In the former instance, organisational fora normalise interactions and regulate how they should be carried out, lengthening the proverbial "shadow of the future" and allowing rational actors to build trust. In the latter case, ideas regarding the trustworthiness of others become constitutive of the organisation's normative make-up and the identity and interests of actors embedded therein.

On the third *societal level*, trust can be conceptualised through the concept of *collective ideas*, namely beliefs that pervade society or some relevant subset of it. Here, trusting beliefs regarding another state, its leadership, or even its people in general are held by large sections of society. Trusting beliefs thus "have an intersubjective existence that stands above individual minds and is typically embodied in symbols, discourse and institutions" (Legro 2000, 420).

While this threefold division is a useful way to unpack the incidence of trust in interstate relationships, two further caveats are essential. First, it is important to appreciate that the existence of interpersonal trusting relationships can be central to the incidence of trust on the other two levels. This is the case because individuals in leadership positions, as embedded actors (see Section 3.2.3), have agency within the organisations that they represent and as members of society. They may thus assume roles as boundary-spanning "trust (or distrust) entrepreneurs" (Brugger 2015, 83–84), actors who disseminate trusting (or distrusting) images regarding another state or its leadership to their respective organisations or even society at large.

Second, stable trusting relationships between states in international society necessitate the seeping of trust from the inter-elite to the inter-organisational and inter-societal levels. The most mature trusting relationships, like those constitutive of security communities, are marked by taken-for-grantedness. In such relationships, trust is effectively habitualised. Beliefs regarding the trustworthiness of another state are so pervasive and dominant – part of broadly-shared political discourse within organisations or more broadly within society – that to hold or voice any ideas to the

contrary is almost unfathomable. The more pervasively trusting beliefs regarding another state are embedded into institutions and society at large, the stronger the bond between a hegemon and its follower. The converse, of course, is true when it comes to prevalent distrusting beliefs.

These acknowledgments also have implications for research design. Namely, the incidence and strength of trust is best gauged during extraordinary events, in the midst of crises. The January 25th, 2011 Revolution, part of the broad regional wave of uprisings dubbed the Arab Spring, provides a useful backdrop for assessing trust in the US-Egypt relationship and, by implication, the successes and shortcomings of relationship management by the hegemon.

Trust can be studied through both behaviour- and statement-based indicators. The present study draws predominantly on the latter. In other words, positive statements regarding the interlocutor's actions or their character – references to qualities like benevolence, altruism or willingness to cooperate – can be viewed as useful proxies for assessing trust in relationships (Brugger 2015, 88–91; Weinhardt 2015, 35–36), especially on the elite and organisational levels. Such statements can be mined from relevant policy documents produced by key policymakers (both official sources and in media reporting) as well as from other sources like memoirs or opinion pieces produced by said actors. When it comes to the level of society trust can feasibly be related to commonly held values and visions as well as recognition of similarity, alongside favourable appraisals of the other state's policies. Public discourse – in the media sphere in particular – as well as opinion polls can thus be used to inquire into the incidence of trusting collective beliefs.

When it comes to assessing trust on the *elite level* in the US-Egypt relationship, the original publication speaks to a key insight particularly pertinent for relationship management by the hegemon. Namely, trusting relationships forged between individual policymakers in key positions, even if established over significant periods of time and manifest as more than mere strategic reliance, provide but an unstable foundation for interstate trust. In the US-Egypt relationship during the January 25th, 2011 Revolution, the relationship between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak is an example of a long-running relationship that had been established already during the 1990s, when the Secretary's husband Bill Clinton was president. It appears that Hillary Clinton's initial wavering on whether to desert the strongman or opt for the side of the protesters, was not based *only* on a strategic framing of trust. She actually empathised with Mubarak's predicament, whom she considered not merely a loyal ally of the United States but also a friend. President Barack Obama, in contrast, had had no history with Mubarak prior to entering the White House, and was more willing to contemplate abandoning America's ally of some 30 years as the protests in Egypt turned violent – a decision

which he effectively announced on 2 February 2011. On the Egyptian side, the old guard treated this not as a strategic calculation on the part of American policymakers but as a failure to reciprocate trust, a bitter betrayal of a moral obligation to stand by a faltering ally.

The *organisational level*, in contrast, speaks to both the utility and limits of institutionalised trust in interstate relationships. Military-to-military contacts have been central to the relationship between the US and Egypt ever since the signing of the Camp David Accords and the eventual peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1978 and 1979, respectively. Within a strategic frame, the US could trust the Egyptian armed forces to cater to its end of the bargain – in return for US military aid to Egypt the counterpart would continue to cater to America's interests in the region by keeping peace across the Sinai and, increasingly, combatting terrorism. Through decades-long cooperation, the US had also achieved a level of "interoperability" with the Egyptian armed forces, which also entailed established contacts between trust entrepreneurs in both organisations. These contacts provided the US with a useful backchannel that it could utilise during the heady days of the revolution to remind the Egyptian military of the importance of protecting the people and, as the army assumed a caretaker role after Mubarak ultimately stepped down on 11 February 2011, to remind of the need to keep the democratic transition on track. In the first case, the US was successful: the exit of Mubarak was relatively peaceful. In the latter case, however, the limits of inter-organisational trust became apparent. Throughout 2011 and early 2012, the Egyptian interim ruling body – the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) – slow-walked the transition and the authorities even targeted American NGOs operating in the country with a dubious legal investigation. It thus became clear to the Americans that while they could trust the Egyptian army to cater to US regional interests, they could hardly count on it to manage a transition in keeping with core values that the US hoped would ultimately take root in Egypt.

An exploration into the third *societal level*, finally, illustrates the intractable dilemma brought about by the American hegemon seeking to manage its relationship with Egypt by falling back on inter-elite and inter-organisational contacts and trust-building. Both opinion polls and public discourse bear out a profoundly negative perception of the United States as an actor, although these negative valuations did not unambiguously track Egyptians' views of America's professed values or perceptions of the American people and culture. The logical takeaway, then, is that the US, by failing to live up to its professed values in its policies *vis-à-vis* Egypt and the region at large, has over time fostered an embedding of distrusting beliefs towards the United States into Egyptians' collective psyche. Moreover, such distrust, while it may have initially been created by disapproval of policies – like the US

preference for authoritarian stability, the maintenance of its hegemonic position through regional proxies, or support for Israel – has over time hardened and become identity- and even emotions-based. Such distrusting collective beliefs, reified as they are, tend to be particularly resistant to change. In this vein, any shifts in US policies – including the decision to forsake Mubarak, attempts to support democracy in Egypt through civil society organisations, and provision of economic aid to help with the transition – ultimately had little positive impact on Egyptians' perceptions of the hegemon.

The original publication thus speaks to the existence of a trust–distrust nexus, wherein trusting relations forged by the hegemon with a follower state on the elite and organisational levels is effectively undercut by embedded distrust on the societal level. This insight warrants three further considerations regarding trust-building as a vital component of hegemonic relationship management.

First, the original publication highlights the inherent difficulty that a *liberal* hegemon faces when trying to manage relationships with *authoritarian* allies and partners. In fact, when assessed in terms of trust, establishing a hegemonic bargain with authoritarian elites who do not enjoy broad legitimacy within their constituent societies appears doubly problematic. Such a bargain *not only* implicates the hegemon with the policies pursued by said authoritarian elites, *but also* serves to undermine the position of those very elites locally. This, in turn, actually serves to weaken the foundations of the hegemonic bargain further, rendering relationship management ever more difficult in the future. This is especially likely in cases where the relationship established between the hegemon and follower is deemed illegitimate by sufficiently broad sections of the follower state's populaces. This has arguably been the case in the US-Egypt relationship, where Egypt's regional role has been considerably circumscribed as a result of the grand "trilateral bargain" with the US and Israel.

Secondly, and relatedly, the study illustrates the volatility of such "top-down" hegemonic bargains, particularly in crisis situations. On the one hand, trust built with the authoritarian elites of a follower state on a personal basis might turn into a liability in the face of a crisis, as was evidently the case with Hosni Mubarak as the January 25th, 2011 Revolution unfolded. On the other hand, trust on the level of organisations tends to be issue-specific, limited to the remit of those organisations involved in the trust-building exercise. In the case of the established military-to-military contacts between the US and Egypt, it thus quickly became evident that trust tied to security-related matters did not necessarily mean that the SCAF would be a trustworthy interlocutor for the US in the midst of a political transition process.

Thirdly, the three-level framework for the analysis of interstate trust should prove illuminative for both students of trust and hegemony; both ignore the societal

level of trust at their peril. For the former, it illustrates that the establishment of trust on one level can breed distrust on another. An interstate relationship can thus be both trusting and mis- or distrusting simultaneously depending on levels of analysis and, feasibly, policy domain under scrutiny (see also Juntunen and Pesu 2018; Pesu and Sinkkonen 2019). For the latter, the original publication illustrates that trust-building with authoritarian elites without due regard for the views of the subjugated populaces is at best a bet on short-term as opposed to long-term stability. There is no guarantee that the fruits of decades of trust-building will not be washed away overnight in the event of an abrupt regime change, because there is little trust in the hegemon beyond the ruling echelons. In the process, the hegemonic bargain will be hollowed out and the ability of the hegemon to shape events and exercise leadership moving forward decreased.

The US-Egypt case illustrates, then, the inherent difficulty a hegemon faces when it seeks to manage relationships with partners whose elites do not necessarily share its commitments to all (or even most) of the normative building blocks of the hegemonic order. In such situations, the line between hegemonic failure and successful stabilisation can be razor thin, especially if the hegemon does not enjoy support beyond the policymaking elites in the follower state. This inherent volatility can be contrasted with the relationship between the US and any of its core European allies, where trust has seeped onto the societal level. Herein, it has been feasible for decades to speak of a transatlantic security community, one that has, until very recently at least, been able to withstand considerable crises and maintain trusting relations that pervade all three levels of trust.

4.3 Original Publication III: (Re)defining a hegemon's core value

The third original publication of the present exposition thus turns to the transatlantic community. The article entitled "Connected in freedom? Reconstructing a foundational value in EU and US foreign policy discourses" (published 2019 and co-authored with Henri Vogt) explores how a core value of both these actors, namely freedom, continues to inform their engagement with the world. In particular, the article seeks to shed light on how conceptualisations of freedom voiced by foreign policy leaderships differ on the two sides of the Atlantic. By implication, it also mines to what extent the transatlantic security community – informed not only by shared security interests, economic links and institutions, but also by commitment to commonly-held values – retains its shared normative parameters. The article thus speaks to the potentially shifting foundations of the hegemonic order within its core, and to the possibility of hegemonic failure at its epicentre, by inquiring how

perceptions of a foundational value of the order converge, diverge and fluctuate between the hegemon and its most important partners.

To facilitate this analysis of freedom, it pays to first stress the multifaceted nature of the concept at the centre of the inquiry. When it comes to policymakers, it seems clear that they can employ freedom in a variety of ways: as a foundational value, a justificatory device, an aspirational vision, or even an empty signifier. In addition, battles over the different meanings of freedom, or any other broad value upon which actors can project their own connotations for that matter, can also open up cleavages in domestic and international society. Values are thus invariably subject to hegemonic contestation. A key issue when considering the (ab)uses of freedom by the hegemon is therefore not whether its leadership evokes freedom, but to what kind(s) of freedom they in fact make reference.

Freedom is perhaps the core tenet enshrined into the foundational documents of the American nation, as well as the foreign policy folklore of the United States, from Wilson's Fourteen Points through Roosevelt's Four Freedoms Speech to George W. Bush's Freedom Agenda. It is thus a (even *the*) key building block of American exceptionalism. Despite the centrality of freedom for the construction of the hegemon's identity, the IR discipline has managed to sidestep concerted analysis of the concept *per se*. To facilitate an analysis of freedom in US and EU political discourse, the article constructs two tripartite typologies of freedom, drawing predominantly on literature in political theory and political philosophy.

The first of these threefold typologies is built upon Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between *negative* and *positive* freedom. The former, in short, pertains to *non-interference*, to freedom from constraints imposed by others. The latter – though more difficult to pin down – refers to the (cap)ability to make a free *choice* from a menu of alternatives. Such choices must, in addition, be both *meaningful* and *reasonable*, while also granting the actor making the said selection the possibility to actually have access to the benefits flowing from that choice. However, it appears that these two categorisations leave out the possibility that an actor may feel constrained from making a free and meaningful choice even if it is not subject to concrete interference from others, instead being bridled by (structural) external constraints within a (social) system. In this case, freedom entails *non-domination*, the ability to break free of impediments that emanate from, for instance, norms, institutions, habits, or emotional impediments – all possible hindrances to freedom embedded into the fabric of the hegemonic order. By including freedom from domination in this category, the article also acknowledges the multifarious incidence of (hegemonic) power in the international arena. Freedom may thus entail mere non-interference, being free from coercion by another actor, but it might also pertain to breaking out of the shackles of institutions, broader structures of super- and subordination or even dominant discourses.

The second threefold typology looks at freedom from the standpoint of the *level of focus*, the level of social organisations that articulations of freedom pertain to. Most prominently, at least in colloquial speech, freedom tends to be fathomed as an *individual*-level phenomenon, whether in the sense of negative or positive freedom, *e.g.* freedom of assembly, freedom to exercise one's religion *et cetera*. However, freedom can also refer to the *systemic* level. Here freedom is associated with maintaining or refashioning, in an elite-led manner, the constitutive features – like norms, values and institutions – of some distinguishable functionally undifferentiated social constellation. The referents of systemic freedom can thus be a state (the US), a more or less well-defined region (Europe, the transatlantic space, the Middle East), or even a civilisation (the "West"). However, it is possible to fathom a third level upon which freedom can be achieved, one that straddles the space between the individual and the systemic. This kind of *socio-institutional* freedom is created in a bottom-up manner, by individuals who come together, in an egalitarian setting, to create functionally differentiated spheres of freedom for themselves – in the form of, for example, organisations advocating for labour rights or student clubs.

In addition to the two tripartite categorisations that function as a broad analytical framework for the article's analysis of elite freedom discourses there are, of course, a plethora of different ways to think about how freedom may factor in political speech. In the context of international affairs, two further distinctions appear particularly relevant. On the one hand, freedom can be articulated either in an *instrumental* manner, as a means to achieve some other (potentially even insidious) end, or as an *intrinsic* value, something that is important in its own right. On the other hand, freedom can be fathomed as *inward-looking* or *outward-bounded*. In the former case, freedom is associated with sectored-off (national) communities, in the latter with trying to expand the remit of freedom in(to) the space beyond such communities.

Armed with these categorisations of freedom as an analytical toolkit, the article explores how the EU and the US evoke freedom in key foreign policy-related documents stretching back to the early 2000s, which, for present purposes, can be deemed (however partially) representative of their foreign policy discourse writ large. This temporal congruence, along with the careful selection and close reading of these documents, allows for the making of *meaningful comparisons* between the Union and the US for the present purposes – in spite of the fact that as international actors, the two are very different.

The EU's freedom discourse can be distilled into three distinguishable storylines. The first ties freedom to the idea of a *European dream*, essentially a positive framing of freedom that sets the systemic-level vessel within which said freedoms exist – Europe, or rather the project of European integration and all it has entailed – apart

from the rest of the world. The second, *an enabling logic*, refers to the Union's self-identification as an actor whose role it is to create conditions within which others may flourish. In other words, the Union's positive freedom agenda is not merely about forging a European zone of freedom, it is about creating systemic conditions for other states to realise their potential and, especially under the rubric of the new EU buzzword "resilience", to do so in a non-dominating fashion, perhaps even in the sense of socio-institutional freedom. The third storyline, with a more recent lineage, we term *seeking sovereignty*; especially after the eruption of the Ukraine Crisis in 2014, the Union has become increasingly privy to its need to guarantee non-interference by external actors with malicious intentions. This refers to both affairs of the Union and the ability of member states (in the sense of sovereignty) as well as their citizens to enjoy the negative and positive freedoms traditionally guaranteed to them.

In the case of the US, three broad "thematics" of freedom emerged in the selected foreign policy documents. These thematics, each in their own way, latch onto different metanarratives regarding America's identity (or identities) as an international actor. Firstly, over the course of all three administrations analysed, the perfection of freedom in the United States is explicitly linked to America's role as a *shining exemplar* for the rest of the world to follow. This is clearly in keeping with the exemplary tradition of American exceptionalism. However, in this thematic, as in the others that follow, freedom is articulated in different ways by the different presidential administrations.

Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama spoke of the perfection of, so we can gather, systemic freedom at home as a guarantor for America's ability to function abroad as a beacon of liberty. Donald Trump's speeches, in turn, stress – more poignantly than his predecessors – the need to put "America First" and "Make America Great Again". Both slogans function as calls for the realisation of a particular brand of freedom, for America's disengagement from global interconnections, or non-interference. Upon closer inspection, Trump's understanding of freedom here bears little resemblance to, for example, Obama's articulation of freedom as non-domination, where America's quest for freedom would also allow other nations to strive for a (normatively speaking) better way of life. Nor is Trump seeking to enable disparate groups with potentially conflicting identities to strive for socio-institutional freedom and reconcile their differences in the process.

The second thematic – similarly tied to ideas of American exceptionalism, but this time to missionary variants thereof – is termed *active promoter of freedom*. The "unipolar moment" of the 1990s brought with it apparently infinite opportunities for the US to remake the world. This novel structural state of affairs led to an ideational convergence of sorts regarding America's preferable role as an *activist* hegemon,

even if differences persisted over how much say others in the international arena would have regarding the manner in which the US would pursue such designs. America's global engagement would thus oscillate between unilateral and multilateral approaches. Freedom, as a foundational value of the American experiment, has until very recently played a prominent role in these forays.

George W. Bush's Freedom Agenda (see also Section 4.1 and Original Publication I) is symptomatic here, insofar as freedom took on both an intrinsic and an instrumental quality. On the one hand, freedom was framed as normatively desirable in its own right, as a value to be aspired to. On the other hand, it served as a signifier that would allow the US to wed together its value-based aspirations and hegemonic designs. This link was underpinned by a deceptively simple and, in hindsight, ill-informed logic. Barring the ambitious operation to free Iraq, the realisation of negative freedoms would entail non-interference in the lives of individuals by their governments and would be achieved through the creation of more economic opportunities via freer markets.[80] This would, so the story went, ensure regional stability in the Middle East, rendering the United States safer in the process.

For Barack Obama, the envisaged form that active American freedom promotion would take was qualitatively different. Especially the early years of the presidency entailed a process of atonement with the world, epitomised by a more multilateral approach. In key speeches, Obama spoke of freedom in light of creating positive opportunities for people in faraway lands, and even alluded to non-interference and non-domination by the hegemon in the affairs of other countries. The US would function as an active enabler as opposed to an interventionist enforcer of freedom. In this vein, he also underscored the need for institutions and creating "sustainable systems" for enabling human development – allusions to systemic and socio-institutional freedom.

In the case of Trump, however, the tradition of active freedom promotion has, at best, been paid lip service to and respected in the breach. Admittedly the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) does evoke "champion[ing of] American values" as integral for the administration's international engagement (Trump 2017), while Vice President Mike Pence has made calls for respect of religious freedom abroad. Yet, by and large, the administration has, in both word and deed, made clear that the promotion of freedom could become a hindrance for achieving other more pressing national security interests. Freedom has little intrinsic value for Trump and his team, and they do not even seem to be using it instrumentally as a veneer for other designs.

80 Arguably, it was negative freedom in the sense of non-interference that Bush had in mind for Iraq as well, see Korhonen (2003, 711–712).

The third thematic, one that links up the George W. Bush and Trump presidencies but lay dormant during Obama's tenure, is called *saviour of civilisation*. In short, freedom has intermittently assumed the role of a civilisational marker in American foreign policy talk. In the Bush era, the battle against terrorism was framed as a contest between the forces of freedom and non-freedom, between good and evil. However, for Bush, freedom as a marker of civilisation seemed to also assume a systemic quality – a world free of terror, a better system forged by the hegemon, would facilitate the enjoyment of (negative) freedoms by individuals. In the case of Donald Trump, civilisational tropes have returned with a vengeance into America's foreign policy vocabulary. Here civilisation is equated with an imagined collection of predominantly Western nation states that share a common politico-religious heritage. The realisation of freedom, in the negative sense of non-interference for both said nation states and their inhabitants, is tied to the sustainability of such politico-cultural bonds within the West (this is the apparent systemic component in the Trumpian conception of freedom). In addition, Trump sees no need – unlike the younger Bush did – to downplay the potential dangers of such civilisational posturing. The White House incumbent thus revels in amplifying identity-based struggles, and has done so both domestically and internationally.

This odyssey into conceptions of freedom in US foreign policy discourse thus shows variation between administrations *within* the above-described broad storylines – the kind of variation that could not, in fact, be found in the case of the European Union during the time period under scrutiny. To illustrate, all three presidential administrations, each in their own way, espouse an exemplary understanding of American exceptionalism and tie freedom to the perfection of the American experiment. However, Bush and Obama, in contrast to Trump, viewed the US as an active freedom promoter, while Bush and Trump tie the realisation of freedom to civilisational affinities, something Obama sought to avoid. The way in which each administration fathoms freedom as a foundational value thus shows variance. In this manner, the meaning of a hegemon's core values fluctuates, it is, to an extent, in the mind of whoever utters such idea(l)s. The notion of freedom can constitute and inform different ways of enacting a hegemonic role on the international arena depending on how the hegemon's political elites fathom the concept, or could even inform the rescinding of such a hegemonic role altogether. (A prospect that remains alive and well given internal drivers in the United States [see Section 2.3], regardless of the ultimate fate of Donald Trump's presidency). In this way, the intrinsic ideational underpinnings of hegemony, through the articulation and interpretation of values, come to have bearing upon America's international agency.

This brings the discussion to the other key contribution of the article, namely the similarities and differences between the European Union and the United States with respect to the evocation of freedom. There is a clear distinction, in terms of the

positive-negative triangle, when it comes to how the notion of freedom is framed by these two international actors. In short, the US, especially during Republican administrations, places greater emphasis on non-interference at both the level of the individual and the polity, while the Union focuses on positive freedoms, on generating meaningful choices for individuals. This is hardly surprising; there is a perennial difference between the two shores of the Atlantic when it comes to the role the state should play in the lives of individuals and to what extent international institutions should circumscribe the room for manoeuvre of states in the global arena.

When it comes to *the level of focus*, particularly systemic freedom, important similarities and differences come to the fore. For both the EU and the US, there is a system regenerating logic in their espousal of freedom. For the Union, this is epitomised, for instance, in the linkage established between societal resilience and freedom. For the United States, a similar drive to enhance the realisation of freedom by altering the ordering logic of some meaningful subset of the international system is evident, for example, in Bush's Freedom Agenda and Barack Obama's calls for "genuine democracy" in the MENA region against the backdrop of the Arab Spring in 2011. However, when it comes to tying freedom to the notion of civilisation, the Bush and especially Trump administrations pose a stark departure from the EU's articulations of freedom. The Union, for all intents and purposes, remains rhetorically "non-hegemonic", eschewing control and othering in favour of enabling. Bush's ideas of a civilisation of freedom, imposed by the hegemon if need be, and especially Trump's ideas regarding an American (and Western) civilisation under threat from external diffusions, illustrate that the hegemon is willing to both dominate others and resist outside interference – all in the name of freedom.

There is much more commonality, unsurprisingly, with the articulations of freedom espoused by the Obama administration and the EU. Obama's more multilateralist, open and co-optive approach to the international arena was a closer fit with the Union than Bush's frequent unilateralism and especially Trump's current aloof transactionalism (see Section 4.4 and Original Publication IV below). By framing freedom in terms of non-domination and implying that societies can enhance freedom by building institutions (in a bottom up manner?), Obama's articulations of freedom show considerable congruence with the EU's resilience agenda and the Union's tradition of functioning as an enabler.

A final similarity between the actors is likewise unsurprising – both the US and the Union place *emphasis on sovereignty*. On the one hand, this entails non-interference from the outside in their own affairs, an inward-bounded understanding of freedom as sovereignty, where the polity should be free to decide how it conducts its business internally. On the other hand, both actors seek to maintain the freedom to act. For the American hegemon – oceans removed from potential great-power rivals and with enviable material and structural power advantages – this is perhaps

an easier proposition than for the Union, which has awoken to the dangers of malign external influencing in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. However, a qualitative difference is discernible here as well. The United States of Donald Trump, intent on greater control over external diffusions (of people, of goods, of ideas) embraces, at least on the level of policy discourse, a much more categorical reading of non-interference and freedom of action than the EU. In particular, Trump's attacks on the institutional edifices of the liberal international order, the very building blocks of US power, constitutes a re-imagining of American hegemonness, a question upon which the final original publication of the present exposition will dwell on at length.

But what of the foundations of the transatlantic community of values with respect to freedom? The article paints a picture of both convergence and divergence. At the broadest level, there is a common commitment to freedom as a notion worthy of defending on both sides of the Atlantic. Concurrently, however, the US and the EU diverge in their understanding of the concept to the extent that divergence can create real policy dilemmas for the actors, with both Bush's unilateralism and the Trump presidency's America First platform providing cases in point. The core of the hegemonic order, in this vein, is – and arguably has always been – both connected in and divided by freedom. It is thus insufficient to speak of shared values within the transatlantic community without contextualising the converging and diverging understandings of these idea(l)s. The ebb and flow of America's political tides (and also those of Europe) illustrate that unless shared understandings of values are actively negotiated, nurtured and reinforced, there is sufficient incongruity to warrant doubts regarding the cohesiveness of the community of values in the future. Such a state of affairs could also prove detrimental for assertions of US hegemony, and, in the end, constitute hegemonic failure.

4.4 Original Publication IV: Domestic ideational contests and the hegemonic role

The final original publication of the present exposition, an article entitled "Contextualising the 'Trump Doctrine': Realism, Transactionalism and the Civilisational Agenda" (published 2018) zooms in on the intrinsic aspects of hegemony in the Trump era. The article seeks to contextualise Donald Trump's (and more broadly his administration's) foreign policy approach within the ideational contests that have, over decades, informed what kind (or any kind) of a hegemon the United States should be. These ideational contests take the form of debates over foreign and security policy priorities. In this manner, the article is an exploration in the fluctuation that take place in the hegemon's own understanding of its hegemonness, and how such variation has bearing upon the hegemon's global engagement.

The article starts by laying out two core assumptions. On the one hand, it is argued that even a *sui generis* president like Donald Trump, one who claims to be beholden to no one as the proverbial outsider, cannot escape the constraining influence that social structures place on the cognitive compasses of policy actors. He, like any other policymaker, is an embedded actor (see Section 3.2.3), constrained by social structures and influenced – to an extent at least – by the prevalent conceptions regarding, for instance, national interests, national identity, prevalent norms and rules *et cetera*. On the other hand, the article appreciates the role that language, or more specifically discourses, play in setting the parameters of the (un)fathomable. In this manner, the theoretically-informed debates that take place over America's role in the world within academia, the foreign policy community on both sides of the revolving door between government and think tanks, as well as in the broader public sphere, play a role in the policy formulation and conduct of a president and his administration.

To appreciate this dynamic in the context of Donald Trump's extraordinary presidency, the article relies on a fourfold typology of ideal-typical American schools of foreign policy thought. The first of these schools, *liberal internationalism*, is arguably the default approach to the world in what has been derogatorily termed the Washington "blob" in the post-Cold War era,[81] although its origins can be traced back at least to Woodrow Wilson's presidency. Liberal internationalists regard the furthering of liberal trade practices and America's core values – democracy, freedom, human rights, rule of law *et cetera* – as central to the realisation of America's national interests, which they tend to view in a rather expansive vein. For proponents of this school, an institutionally bounded understanding of hegemony is central. Liberal internationalists are thus, for all intents and purposes, liberal hegemonists who also push for a grand-strategic orientation of deep engagement. They regard multilateral institutions, from NATO to the WTO, as central for enhancing American power and influence. Liberal internationalists also appreciate the role of economic and soft power alongside military prowess, although they can differ, starkly even, on the correct mix of these tools in concrete foreign policy making situations.

It should by now be obvious, based on the above-introduced studies, that Donald Trump's relationship with liberal internationalism is marked by animosity. In fact, othering *vis-à-vis* liberal internationalists in the so-called foreign policy establishment is integral to Trumpian identity construction. This much is clear even upon a superficial analysis of Trump's policy forays and rhetoric during his presidency. The president, and many on his team, are categorically opposed to

[81] On the "blob", see *e.g.* Samuels (2016) and Walt (2018a).

multilateral institutions and commitments, whether these be the UN, the Paris Agreement on climate change, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA; the Iran nuclear deal). The president has also erected novel barriers to trade in the form of tariffs and sanctions, as well as sought to use America's structural power advantage in the global economic and financial domains to pressure trading partners into making concessions to the US or get in line with the administration's foreign policy priorities. Perhaps the most high-profile recent examples here are the imposition of secondary sanctions with extraterritorial implications for America's partners as part of the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, along with the drive to disrupt the completion of the Nordstream II pipeline project (Geranmayeh and Lafont Rapnouil 2019; Siddi 2020). Meanwhile, President Trump has also questioned the most important security pillars of the US-led hegemonic order, namely NATO as well as the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances. The Trump administration has, moreover, been markedly quiet when it comes to defence of America's cherished values and opted for warmer relations with many a dictator, whether Egypt's Abdelfattah Al-Sisi or North Korea's Kim Jong-un, who have previously been *persona non grata* or anathema in Washington.

The second school of thought in the fourfold typology is *neoconservatism*, an approach which was particularly ascendant during George W. Bush's presidency. Neoconservatives share with liberal internationalists a strong conviction in the exceptionality of American values, but for them the espousal of such values takes on religious and moralistic overtones. The US represents the virtuous in a battle between good and evil, and to prevail in such a battle the hegemon can assume a unilateral posture *vis-à-vis* multilateral fora and international law or even resort to pre-emptive use of force and forcible regime change in faraway lands. Neoconservatives are also committed to the maintenance of American military primacy, and this means that both economic and soft power, by definition, take on an auxiliary role.

Trump's relationship to the neoconservative foreign policy tradition is complicated, as evinced by the hiring and (ultimately) firing of former Bush administration official John Bolton as National Security Advisor. On the one hand, many of Trump's rhetorical attacks and antagonistic posturing towards multilateral institutions could have been undertaken by an administration that ascribes to a neoconservative agenda. Likewise, on its own, Trump's emphasis on "Making America Great Again" by building a strong military would likely meet with the approval of many a neoconservative pundit. On the other hand, neoconservatives have lambasted Trump for eschewing a foreign policy grounded on the promotion of America's cherished values in both word and deed. A further peculiar commonality, however, is the Trumpian focus on the notion of civilisation, and the intermittent framing of international politics as a Manichean battle between good and evil, particularly one between Christianity and "radical Islam".

The third tradition relevant for present purposes is *realism*, particularly in its contemporary incarnation in the American academia and – to a lesser extent – think tank world. For present purposes, the core premises of realism can be summed up succinctly thus. States exist in an anarchical system, the logic of which pits them against one another in a competition for relative power advantage. Power is understood to encompass quantifiable, chiefly material capabilities in the realm of especially military and economic power. Moreover, for self-interested states bent on survival, there is little space for value-based concerns in foreign policy. At best, they are a welcome side effect, a veneer for self-interested designs. At worst, values distract from more pressing foreign policy concerns, ones designed to ensure state survival. Despite these shared premises, as has already been argued at length (see Sections 3.1.1–3.1.3), contemporary realists do not agree on the correct level of ambition for a hegemon. Some join liberal internationalists in advocating for a grand strategy of deep engagement, while others call for offshore balancing, retrenchment or restraint – effectively rebukes of liberal hegemony.

There remain considerable similarities between realism and President Trump and his team's developing approach to foreign policy. To an extent, at least on the level of rhetoric, Trump seems to be heeding to the calls of offshore balancers and restraint advocates by pressuring allies to do more for their defence and pledging to withdraw US troops from the Middle East. His posturing against Iran, however, may ultimately end up having the opposite effect. A more obvious parallel is the focus of the administration, in its 2017 NSS and the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) on "great-power competition". The strategies frame the world as an arena of competition between, for the most part, sovereign states and underline the importance of the great powers. In this vein, the Trump administration has moved to challenge China, the only potential near-peer great-power competitor for the US in the foreseeable future. The erection of tariffs against Beijing, restricting the use of Chinese technology in the US, and pressure on America's allies to do the same are, perhaps, only the opening salvos in a newfound more muscular approach towards China.

The fourth tradition under consideration, *neoisolationism*, takes the prescription for America to rescind its hegemonic designs further than the realists. The roots of the tradition stem from the days of the Founding Fathers and the exemplary vein of American exceptionalism, but it also has some (unsavoury) links with the opposition against joining World War II (hence the prefix "neo" to make the distinction between the interwar and present variant). Currently, neoisolationist viewpoints are voiced from both the right and the left. In terms of foreign policy, the prescription is still inherently similar to that of its antecedents: the US should focus on rebuilding at home and, in the process, forswear hegemonic designs. The maintenance of superpower status or the whole liberal hegemonic order, according to

neoisolationists, makes the US less well-off and distracts from the necessary task of perfecting the American project at home.

Donald Trump, especially in the early stages of his presidency, was described by some pundits as an isolationist. This description, however, is wide off the mark. The president remains willing to resort to military force, although he has done so intermittently, haphazardly, and partly as a way to create "spectacles". The missile attacks against the Syrian regime in April 2017 and the strike in early January 2020 that killed Qassem Soleimani, leader of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), are telling examples (Luce 2020a). Nor does pressing for increases in the defence budget support the proposition that Trump is prone to isolationism. In fact, his approach to the international is better described as *transactionalism*. Trump is inclined to sector off international politics into a collection of one-off deals. These exchanges are, moreover, defined by relative as opposed to absolute gains, which is to say that the objective is to win in the here and now as opposed to accumulate mutually beneficial gains long into, or at some unspecified point in, the future. Specific as opposed to general reciprocity prevails. Transactionalism is thus both issue-based and ahistorical. In Trump's case such an approach can, at times, masquerade as (neo)isolationism, but does not amount to an actual espousal of the tenets of this foreign policy tradition.

In fact, Trump's transactionalist inclinations come to the forefront on a regular basis. His drive to renegotiate trade agreements with traditional friends and allies, from Canada and Mexico to Japan and South Korea, alongside the imposition of tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from Europe and other key partners, are all pertinent examples of Trumpian transactionalism in practice. However, the upside of such transactionalism for allies (if there is one) is that Trump is at times amenable to compromise. Such was the case when Trump and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker agreed to a truce in July 2018: the US effectively refrained from pursuing levies on European cars in return for pledges that the EU would purchase more soybeans from the United States. Transactionalism can also bring unexpected openings for America's enemies, as evinced by Trump's mixture of incendiary rhetoric and summit diplomacy with North Korea (Ifft 2020), as well as the US-Taliban Agreement reached in March 2020 (Walton 2020).

By comparing and contrasting Donald Trump's and his administration's foreign policy forays with the ideal-typical foreign policy traditions described above, it is possible to arrive at a general descriptor for the emerging "Trump doctrine". The president's foreign policy approach is a peculiar amalgamation of: (i) opposition to liberal internationalism, (ii) civilizational tropes and primacist inclinations of neoconservatives, (iii) a materialist and states- and competition-based understanding of the international arena from the realists, and (iv) transactionalist inclinations that can, at least in the realm of trade, intermittently masquerade as isolationist impulses.

Thus, the emerging "Trump doctrine" can be termed *transactionalist realism with civilisational undertones*. This fledgling approach to the world comes replete with potential pitfalls in terms of the future of America's global engagement and, more relevant for present purposes, the longevity of the bargains and institutions that underpin the US-led hegemonic order. For the sake of clarity, these downsides can also be usefully tied to the material, intrinsic and socio-institutional images of hegemony.

The first issue, already discussed at length above, is Trump's reliance on an understanding of power that places material capabilities, military and economic, at the forefront, and does so at the expense of other less tangible ways of exerting international influence. In particular, Trump and some of his advisors have made much noise about regaining America's (apparently) lost "respect" in the international arena, a core component of the President's campaign pledge to "Make America Great Again". The chosen means for achieving this regaining of status have been the building up of military capabilities and a manifest willingness to exercise economic coercion in the form of tariffs and sanctions. However, the president seems utterly oblivious to the relational underpinnings of power, let alone the fact that respect, status and prestige are inherently social variables. The key value-added of the socio-institutional image of hegemony is that capabilities do not automatically beget influence, even for the hegemon. At the same time, the administration eschews other ways of exercising American power, particularly the legitimacy-enhancing potential of international institutions and the upsides of relying on soft power instruments to persuade and attract, as opposed to coerce, other actors to heed to America's will. In the process, the administration is leaving untapped a great deal of America's potential to shape the international arena.

The second issue pertains to the purposes for which the US, as the incumbent hegemon, accumulates and exercises power. When it comes to the Trump presidency, two possibilities rise to the fore. On the one hand, as already argued above, it is possible that Trump is merely seeking to build power for the sake of power – shifting US engagement with the world from one of liberal to illiberal hegemony – as the president seems to equate other states' "respect" for America with just such accumulation of resources. The other possibility is that there indeed is an ideational grounding for the pursuit of power, a marriage of America First tropes that call for the US to tend after its own lot, and for other sovereign nation states to follow suit. The vision is one of a less interdependent and "thinner" hegemonic order, one that consist of nation states pursuing their interests in a world of competition. Within this order, there is also a civilisational core, built around the West. The problem is that Trump's vision is inherently exclusive, both domestically and internationally, and is unlikely to have much traction beyond some states where similar exclusionary civilisational rhetoric resonates more broadly – Poland and Hungary come to mind

here. In fact, such calls for civilisational affinities as markers of commonality, identity categories that are based on "othering", bear the risk of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies, increasing as opposed to alleviating the antagonism that is felt towards the hegemon by other actors in the international arena.

The third conundrum concerns the way in which the Trump administration – and the president in particular – marries together transactionalism and realism. There are two pressing issues with Trumpian transactionalism: it renders foreign policy amoral and short-sighted. It is, of course, too much to expect a hegemon to invariably act for some higher good in the international arena, the real world is simply far too messy. However, this does not automatically mean that a hegemon's leadership should forgo such considerations, or always act in a blatantly self-interested manner. Classical realists like Hans Morgenthau (1945; 1955; see also Brown 2001; Kirshner 2012; 2019), much more so than their contemporary brethren, appreciated that international conduct is replete with such dilemmas and counselled states to engage in prudent conduct – long-term thinking that necessitates acknowledging moral dilemmas that are always present in any political act. In the case of Trump, it is unclear whether the president is able to either engage in long-term (strategic) thinking or acknowledge the agonising moral conundrums that the exercise of power invariably brings to the fore.

What, then, do the above reflections mean for the future of America's hegemonic role in the Trump era, and possibly beyond? The first point is that the "Trump doctrine", in its emergent form, is not (only) a figment of the president's *sui generis* inclinations. Its building blocks are not "of Trump", they are all present in the debates and competing discourses of American foreign policy. The article thus speaks to both the limits and possibilities afforded to foreign policy leaderships in refashioning America's global role and, by implication, the meaning and nature of US hegemony, by drawing on intrinsic ideational components. It shows that a president intent on refashioning how the US conducts its international affairs has a broad, but not unlimited, realm of ideational background matter to draw upon. The fact that Trump has been able to challenge accepted American foreign policy conventions to a broader extent than initially expected by drawing on traditions of US foreign policy thought that challenge the default position of liberal hegemony, shows that the oscillation in America's international engagement may, in the future, be more pronounced than it has been in the past. In this manner, intrinsic factors, and particularly *ideational* intrinsic factors of hegemony, matter a great deal.

The second and more fundamental point has to do with the potential damage that the emerging "Trump doctrine" risks doing to America's global standing. Trump has pledged to both "Make America Great" and put "America First", but upon reflection these two aims appear irreconcilable. Greatness, as already argued, necessitates recognition from others, not merely from America's great-power challengers China

and Russia, but also – even especially – from America's allies and partners, those states upon whose co-optation American hegemony has relied on for decades. Here the contradiction built into Trump's transactionalist realism is most evident. By angering America's traditional allies and partners with a mixture of deal making based on zero-sum premises and competition-inducing rhetoric, the president is pushing these states further away from America's orbit, even inducing them to contemplate hedging strategies in the realms of both trade and defence. The recent introduction of the Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) – designed to facilitate trade between the EU and Iran by working around US-imposed sanctions – might serve as a harbinger of things to come (Geranmayeh and Lafont Rapnouil 2019). As pointed out, hedging by allies is a sign of eroding trust in the hegemon and a sure-fire harbinger of a sustained legitimacy crisis, and, arguably, an even greater threat to the sustainability of the US-led hegemonic order than any challenge posed by a near-peer competitor. The "Trump doctrine", if carried out to its logical conclusion, thus looks to erode America's comparative advantage *vis-à-vis* its hegemonic challenger(s). It risks doing so by alienating the elaborate US alliance and partnership network – the most important force multiplier the United States has – and effectively destroying the deep foundations of American structural power embedded into the architecture, institutions and infrastructure of the liberal hegemonic order. This would be the greatest hegemonic failure of all.

5 Final reflections: Covid-19 and hegemonic failure

At the time of writing these reflections in the confines of a home office in the Helsinki suburb of Pohjois-Haaga, the US presidential election contested between incumbent Donald J. Trump and challenger Joseph R. Biden Jr. is just seven days away. As the tectonic plates of US politics may yet again shift in an election unlike any previous one, the United States and Europe are bracing for a winter of uncertainty marked by fears of new lockdowns and economic turmoil in the throes of another wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. A virus that has wreaked unprecedented human suffering, imposed massive economic costs, and transformed the lives of people the world over is also proving to be a defining issue of the 2020 election season. In a peculiar twist of fate, even the President of the United States has contracted the disease.

More broadly speaking, the pandemic presents a potentially pivotal crisis for the United States both domestically and in terms of its international engagement – a state of affairs arguably exacerbated by the Trump administration's lacklustre response in both arenas. The tragic human costs of the virus are reflected in the statistics. At the time of writing, in the United States alone, over 8.5 million people have contracted the SARS-CoV-2 virus and more than 220,000 have died of the Covid-19 disease (WHO 2020). This exogenous, or rather "pathogenous", shock presents an opportunity to reflect – very briefly – upon the body of work that comprises this dissertation. In fact, the theoretical exposition on the *three images of hegemony* and the insights attained in the four original publications should provide ample tools for thinking about these exceptional times. Most definitely, the pandemic presents various different avenues for considering the theme of this dissertation, namely hegemonic failure.

As has been argued at length above, the *material image* of hegemony functions as a baseline for the other images and provides a starting point for any discussion on the implications of the pandemic as well. The obvious observation is that the economic repercussions have already been massive, both globally and in the US. According to WTO (2020) forecasts, global GDP is on course to contract by 4.8 per cent, and merchandise trade by 9.2 per cent in 2020. Recovery in the longer run will

depend greatly on how well countries deal with new outbreaks of the virus – particularly the duration and stringency of new lockdowns – along with their ability to shoulder ballooning public debt caused by the pressing need to insert fiscal stimulus into their economies. In the meantime, the swift development and global distribution of a vaccine remains tantamount (*ibid*.). Fears of protectionism also proliferate. The experience of disrupted global supply chains has forced companies to seriously fathom moving production back onshore, while countries are also looking long and hard at security of supply questions. The fact that much of the production of relevant Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) prior to the pandemic centred on China has further strengthened calls for "decoupling", the cutting of ties between the American (or more broadly Western) and Chinese economies especially in sectors viewed as critical for national security (see only Aaltola 2020; Bremmer and Kupchan 2020; Johnson and Gramer 2020; Michta 2020; Hille 2020a).

The economic figures for the United States appear similarly abysmal. According to OECD (2020) statistics, GDP declined by 9 per cent in the second quarter of 2020. Although the American economy has gradually begun a recovery, the Federal Reserve (Fed) recently projected a real GDP growth of negative 6.5 per cent for 2020. The labour market implications have also been massive: the unemployment rate spiked at 14.7 per cent in April, figures unseen since the Great Depression. To make matters worse, job losses have disproportionately affected low-income workers and minorities, further exacerbating the already rife economic inequalities in the country (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System 2020; Cochrane and Gay Stolberg 2020). The $2 trillion stimulus package signed into law on 27 March has softened the blow, and in all likelihood other such packages will follow. However, such stimulus spending looks to drive up America's already substantial budget deficits and public debt (McBride, Chatzky and Siripurapu 2020).[82]

There is, of course, a converse argument to be made. It remains illustrative of the deep-rootedness of US hegemony that the country remains in a unique position to afford large-scale stimulus spending so long as the dollar retains its role as the global reserve currency (cf. Stokes 2014; Norrlof 2014; Tooze 2020a; Lastrapes 2020). Relatedly, and despite political dysfunction in the country, the Fed has retained its role as a "lender of last resort" for the international economy through dollar swaps with other key central banks. The ability to leverage the power of the dollar thus remains a vital foundation for American international leadership, and the dollar remains a valued good that the hegemon can provide to the international community

[82] America's public debt is set to hit a post-World War II high of 106 per cent of GDP by 2023, according to Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projections (McBride, Chatzky and Siripurapu 2020)

– or more specifically to those it deems fit to receive the currency – in times of dire need (Norrlof 2020, 1299–1302).

Therefore, despite the massive economic repercussions, it is not immediately clear to what extent this global health emergency will impact the transition of *relative* material power in the international system between the US and China, or more broadly the West and the "rest". It is true that China has managed to turn the corner quite quickly with draconian measures to stifle the pandemic, and its economy is projected to expand by 1.8 per cent in 2020, making it the only G20 economy with a positive growth rate for the year (OECD 2020). One much-touted view is that at least initially the "East Asian model" for dealing with the pandemic, not only in China but also South Korea and Singapore, has borne better results than those tried in the West (Mahbubani 2020; see also Boot 2020; Winkler 2020). However, in pandemic times there is considerable space for uncertainty. Beyond the obvious effect of global economic fluctuations, even countries that have initially done a good job stifling the disease might be hit with new epidemic waves so long as the pandemic runs rampant in other corners of the globe. In the long run, the lessons countries draw from their successes and failures in pandemic response and subsequent policy implementation become vital. This is a topic squarely in the domain of the intrinsic image, where pluralistic democracies with accountable authorities and fora for unimpeded public debate – and this includes the United States regardless of its current domestic tribulations – might enjoy an advantage over less free societies (Nye 2020; Schake 2020; Niblett and Vinjamuri 2020; Economist 2020).

But what of *military power capabilities*, the metric *par excellence* of US primacy and a topic of particular infatuation for President Trump and his administration? Here one knock-on effect of the economic malaise is easy to fathom: sustained pressure to decrease defence spending in favour of investing in domestic programmes – ones encompassing healthcare, the creation of jobs and the educational system – should be expected in the coming years (see *e.g.* Barno and Bensahel 2020; Egel *et al*. 2020; O'Hanlon 2020). The crisis has also underlined that military power is fungible to a limited extent in the face of a pandemic.[83] This is the case despite the role that the armed forces have played in helping the Covid-19 response, for instance in the form of medical personnel, manufacture and distribution of equipment, provision and setting up of medical facilities, as well as research and development (Bowman and Zivitski 2020). Perhaps most troubling of all, the pandemic illustrates that the US has long clung to a circumscribed definition of security, one based on "kinetic" and "hard-core security" that does not sufficiently

[83] To refresh, "'fungibility' refers to the ease with which power resources useful in one issue-area can be used in other issue-areas" (Baldwin 2013, 278).

account for "anthropogenic and naturogenic threats" (Reich and Dombrowski 2020, 1258). This has arguably left the hegemon ill-prepared, dependent on others for "early warning" mechanisms, means for controlling and monitoring the flow of disease across borders, requisite scientific knowledge for dealing with large-scale pandemics, as well as the production of medicines, PPE and other relevant medical devices like ventilators. Such a role of "security consumer" as opposed to "security provider" does not necessarily reflect well upon a supposed hegemon (*ibid*., 1274–1279).

Overall, the current global malaise lays bare the circumscribed understanding of power that undergirds the material image. It is evident that a capabilities-based view on power is insufficient when analysing a problem that exists in, and by virtue of, a world marked by instantaneous connectivity and profound interdependence. In such a world, the traditional instruments of power – whether of the economic or military variety – appear blunt tools, especially if used in an uncoordinated fashion by disparate actors across the globe. It is illustrative that the US, militarily the most powerful state in the world with an economy that had just experienced the longest period of sustained growth in its history, has been so devastatingly hit by this novel virus.

The second *intrinsic image*, then, has plenty to offer here. Much has been made of the dismal US response to the pandemic: thus far the death toll in the United States represents roughly 20 per cent of the global total, while the US houses roughly four per cent of the world's population (Johns Hopkins Univeristy and Medicine 2020; Holcombe, Yan and Pokharel 2020). Various reasons for this failure have been offered up, some of them inherently structural in nature. It is, for instance, evident that the decentralised nature of the American political system has played a role. Coordination problems between different levels of the federal system have been rife. States have not only competed over medical supplies, but also pursued independent uncoordinated policies, some of them less "science-driven" than others (Jha 2020). The US was also hampered by a chronic lack of preparedness. There was no functioning nationwide system for testing and contact tracing in place, while decades of insufficient federal funding for pandemic preparedness on state and local levels have further marred the nationwide response (Patrick 2020; Council on Foreign Relations 2020).

Given such challenges, any presidential administration would have struggled with mustering a successful reaction to the pandemic. Yet, the chaotic first three years of the Trump administration had created a string of other impediments. In federal agencies, the Trump era has been marked by record turnover of staff and a manifest inability to fill many key positions, which has led to an unusually high number of interim appointments and inexperienced people in vital government posts (Steinhauer and Kanno-Youngs 2020; Dunn Tepas 2020; Graff 2020). Trump's term

has also been defined by a string of largely self-inflicted crises and scandals. These include the special counsel investigation into his campaign's Russia ties and the president's obstruction of justice, as well as the impeachment inquiry and trial, kicked off by Trump's attempts to pressure Ukraine to launch a politically motivated investigation into Joe Biden and his son Hunter. Given these impediments (and others), this White House was uniquely unprepared to face a global crisis (Wright 2020b), let alone a pandemic of proportions unseen since the influenza epidemic of 1918–1920.

By many accounts, the administration exacerbated the situation instead of supplying much-needed leadership. Even before the initial outbreak, the Trump team had exhibited an inability to think long as opposed to short term when it came to pandemic threats. For example, a decision was made in 2018 to dismantle much of the inter-agency bureaucratic coordination structure for global health crises, an edifice that the Obama administration had put in place to help deal with global scale epidemics in the midst of the US response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak (Garrett 2020b; Debenedetti 2020). In addition, the administration undermined the ability for early response by failing to allocate sufficient resources for the already chronically underfunded Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to maintain its global epidemic response activities. The organisation's China office, for example, had dwindled in size from 47 personnel to only fourteen during Trump's term, effectively enfeebling the organisation's potential to monitor the situation on the ground, convey information to Washington D.C., and possibly assist the Chinese authorities (Council on Foreign Relations 2020, 55–56; Taylor 2020). During the pandemic, Trump has also been criticised for failing to use tools at the executive's disposal, including the Defence Production Act (DPA), to combat shortages of key medical supplies and protective equipment (Kavi 2020).

Despite the pandemic opening up rare space for bipartisanship in Washington D.C., which culminated in the passing of the already mentioned economic support package in March (Cochrane and Gay Stolberg 2020), domestic ideational contests have been front and centre throughout the crisis, and the virus has essentially become a party-political issue (Rothwell and Makridis 2020; Dunn 2020). In an election year, rhetorical barbs have been traded on both sides, and the Democrats have sought to make the election a "referendum" on Trump's handling of the pandemic (Erickson and O'Keefe 2020). For his part, the president has chosen to double down and fan the flames of polarisation and partisanship instead of seeking to unify the country.

Examples abound. In late February, for instance, by then fully aware of the danger posed to the US by the pandemic (Parker, Dawsey and Abutaleb 2020), Trump referred to the coronavirus as a "hoax" exaggerated by the Democrats at one of his trademark rallies (T. Franck 2020). After initially ceding much of the field to state authorities to deal with the crisis (Nicholas and Gilsinian 2020), Trump has

proceeded to blame especially Democrat-led cities and states for mishandling the outbreak, and repeatedly criticised them for ruining the economy with strict lockdown measures. The Democrats have naturally fired back, time and again condemning the White House's rhetoric as irresponsible and dangerous (Shear and Mervosh 2020). In early October, the president also pulled out of talks with the Democrats in Congress over a new stimulus package, prompting a blame game with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. This occurred despite warnings by Fed Chair Jerome Powell and other economists that recovery would hinge upon another round of stimulus spending, (Politi 2020; Siegel 2020). Although Trump seemed to backtrack later, at the time of writing the package remains hostage to party-political wrangling.

Reflecting the clash of domestic narratives over the public health crisis, there has been a symbiotic relationship between the president and his favourite conservative media outlets, particularly Fox News, which has functioned as both an echo chamber for Trump's views and a source of Covid-19 talking points for the White House (Farhi and Ellison 2020; Smith 2020).This has at times meant questioning ideas held by scientists – whether they work in Trump's administration, at the CDC or the intelligence community – regarding the dangers and management of the pandemic (Harris *et al*. 2020; Kinsella *et al*. 2020). Trump has, for instance, exaggerated testing capacity, downplayed mortality rates, questioned the utility of wearing protective masks, made claims about the effectiveness of untested treatments, and aired overly optimistic prognoses regarding an expedited rollout of a vaccine (Paz 2020; see also Applebaum 2020).

On a more academic note, Covid-19 has likewise played a role when it comes to broader grand-strategic debates in the US – the fountainhead of ideational contests over global engagement within the foreign policy establishment. Pandemic threats have finally been placed front and centre in discussions where they have traditionally been, at best, second fiddle and, at worst, a mere footnote (Reich and Dombrowski 2020). So far, the results appear altogether unsurprising. Proponents of different foreign policy courses have drawn conclusions from the outbreak that largely support their hitherto articulated policy positions and prescriptions.

For liberal internationalists and deep engagement advocates, the pandemic naturally proves the need for global coordination through multilateral fora, and illuminates the necessity for the US to lead once more – and not just by the power of example (Johnston 2020).[84] For offshore balancers and restraint advocates, the crisis

[84] For a particularly illuminating discussion laying out such views, see Kirk *et al*. (2020). For an analytical take laying out the impediments to international cooperation, but also stressing its importance in the face of the pandemic, consult Ikenberry and Kupchan (2020).

serves as further proof that squandering resources on global forays has taken place at the expense of fortifying the resources of societal resilience at home (Walt 2020a; Metz 2020). One variation of this line of argument is that America's allies, in fending for themselves during the pandemic, have illustrated that the US can afford to step back, learning from and following the lead of others (Preble and Burrows 2020). There is thus little convergence regarding the correct way forward for US global engagement *per se* in a post-pandemic world (Burns 2020).[85] However, an oft-articulated acknowledgement across the spectrum is that Covid-19 will act as an accelerant of great-power competition between the US and China (see *e.g*. Allen *et. al*. 2020; Kirk *et al*. 2020; Ashford and Shifrinson 2020; Moore 2020; Cimmino, Kroenig and Pavel 2020).[86]

Thirdly, it is clear that the *socio-institutional image,* along with the three original publications on *order-building narratives*, *trust* and *freedom*, provide various pathways for analysing the implications of the pandemic for US hegemony. In light of the above, it is hardly news that the United States' reaction to the crisis has not been one befitting a *legitimate hegemon*, a leader willing to go to great lengths to achieve a coordinated global approach, and one that harnesses international channels of cooperation, both formal and informal, to facilitate a timely response (Norrlof 2020; Walt 2020b).[87] It is apparent that there is no global *vision*, no compelling *narrative* being articulated by the hegemon's leadership for how the international community should band together to deal with the crisis.

Although the crises are different, the obvious parallel for the current malaise is the previous great shock to the system, the global financial crisis of 2007/8, which led to upgrading the role of the G20 as a forum for coordinating action among key economies (Goodman 2020; Edson and Fontaine 2020). In the midst of the global pandemic, neither the G20, nor the G7, for that matter, has mustered a meaningful response to the crisis. In fact, the Trump administration's disdain for multilateralism, in this case towards the World Health Organisation (WHO), and dogged insistence that the Chinese origins of the novel coronavirus be acknowledged in any joint forays have torpedoed cooperation on both of these fora (Bernes 2020; Hudson and

85 William J. Burns (2020) sees three ideal-types contending: "retrenchment" (some form of offshore balancing/restraint), "restoration" (effectively a return to liberal hegemony/deep engagement) and "reinvention" (a "middle of the road" strategy).

86 "Great-power competition" has become the new buzzword in Washington D.C., trumpeted not only in the Trump administration's policy documents (Schadlow 2018; Trump 2017), but also approaching something of a novel orthodoxy in Washington foreign policy circles more broadly (Friedman 2019; Sinkkonen and Gaens 2020).

87 There is also a stark contrast with the response to the Ebola epidemic by the Obama administration, where the US sought to lead the global fight against the disease (White House 2015; Greer and Singer 2017; Garrett 2020b).

Mekhennet 2020; Wintour, Harvey and Beaumont 2020).[88] At the UN, the US-China chasm has similarly paralysed the Security Council (Gowan and Pradhan 2020).

Trump's attack on the WHO, which the US has, with reason, criticised for ineffectiveness during the initial outbreak in Wuhan, culminated in an announcement to leave the organisation, effective 6 July 2021. This move would strip the body of its largest funder, endangering future operations to fight epidemics (Council on Foreign Relations 2020; Rogers and Mandavilli 2020). Breeding fears of "vaccine nationalism", the US has also announced it will not join the Covid-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility, designed for more equitable global distribution of a vaccine, also to the developing world (Friedman *et al*. 2020). Instead, the United States has opted for bilateral dealings with different vaccine developers as part of "Operation Warp Speed" (US Department of Defense 2020). Others, including the EU, its member states and China, have also placed their own bets on various vaccine developers, but have concurrently joined COVAX, signalling a modicum of international responsibility.[89] The US is therefore not only undermining its soft power by shunning a potential mechanism of global solidarity, it is also leaving other states and actors to pick up the slack in terms of funding, while potentially leaving itself out in the cold by hindering access to some promising vaccine candidates in the COVAX portfolio (Tooze 2020b; Bollyky and Bown 2020; Friedman *et al*. 2020). For the Trump administration, then, it is a zero-sum world even when it comes to combatting a crisis that evidently respects no borders.

Meanwhile, the hegemon and its foremost challenger are locked in a battle of clashing *narratives* regarding the pandemic (Nossel 2020; Aaltola 2020). The US has placed warranted criticism upon China for its attempts at covering up information on the initial outbreak (Garrett 2020a), something Beijing could hypothetically bear international legal responsibility for (Creutz 2020). However, befitting the othering impulses inherent in the nascent "Trump doctrine" (see Original Publication IV), the president has also sought to frame the virus as a chiefly external threat, partly to shift blame abroad for domestic shortcomings. Trump's Address to the Nation on 11 March 2020, when he declared a national emergency over the pandemic, was symptomatic. Instead of calling for a shared global response, the president toyed with nationalist tropes painting a picture of "a foreign virus" entering America's shores from European and Chinese "hotspots" (Trump 2020a;

88 The monikers preferred by the Trump team are "Wuhan virus" or "China virus".

89 China was admittedly slow to join COVAX, only announcing its participation in early October 2020 (Qian and Nebehay 2020).

see also Luce 2020b). Since then Trump has repeatedly resorted to such language, including at the virtual UN General Assembly in September (Trump 2020b).[90]

China has, at times, struck a different tone, stressing its willingness to sacrifice and help, and talking up expertise in combatting the disease (Rolland 2020). In recent remarks at the UNGA, Xi Jinping (2020), after lauding the Chinese response to the pandemic, pledged that China would "continue to work as a builder of global peace, a contributor to global development and a defender of international order" – a not-too-subtle jab at President Trump.[91] In fact, during the initial wave of the pandemic in the spring, there were signs that China was waging a winning battle for legitimacy and leadership, enhancing its soft power by offering expertise and medical supplies to some of America's beleaguered allies (Campbell and Doshi 2020; Farrell and Newman 2020; Mahbubani 2020). However, Beijing has since managed to sour the fruits of its own success with its abrasive brand of "wolf warrior diplomacy" (Gill 2020; Hille 2020b). One pertinent example is the outlandish conspiracy theory parroted by Chinese officials that the virus was planted in Wuhan by the US military (Huang 2020). China has also placed sanctions on Australia in a thinly-veiled reaction to the latter's insistence that an independent probe be conducted into the Covid-19 outbreak, and resorted to critique and outright lies regarding European attempts to combat the disease (Gill 2020; Kassam 2020; Kallio 2020; Small 2020; Nye 2020). Recent global public opinion data points to failures on the part of both the American hegemon and its putative challenger – the "hegemonic reference point" China (Brooks 2012) – to handle the negative fallout of the pandemic. Both states' international image has taken a beating during the crisis, potentially also undercutting future pretensions of global leadership (Noack 2020; Wike, Fetterolf and Mordecai 2020; Silver, Devlin and Huang 2020).

When it comes to America's allies, the US has, likewise, failed to manage vital *relationships* in the midst of the crisis. Particularly troubling was Trump's blindsiding of European leaders, on both EU and national levels, with his flash announcement to close US borders to Europeans on 11 March 2020. The policy was announced without prior consultation or information regarding what the measure actually entailed (Gaouette, Marquadt and Atwood 2020). Even though the EU followed suit, and member states have since resorted to (and continue to employ) similar measures of closing their national borders (Birnbaum 2020; von der Leyen

[90] Trump's targets of criticism have also reached beyond China and Europe. In a nod to the administration's prevalent rhetoric on immigration, Trump has blamed Mexico for an upsurge in Covid-19 cases along the Southern border (Lorea Brust 2020).

[91] This has been a recurring theme for Xi ever since Trump was elected on his America First platform. A much-documented opening salvo was Xi's speech at the World Economic Forum in January 2017 (see Parker 2017).

2020; McClanahan 2020), such lack of coordination with European allies certainly bred further *distrust* of the hegemon's leadership within the transatlantic security community.[92] Other examples underscore the point. During the spring unconfirmed rumours emerged that Trump's team had tried to get a German company to move its vaccine development research to the US, assumedly in anticipation of monopolising distribution (Baer 2020; Farrell and Newman 2020; J. Shapiro 2020) – in hindsight a not-altogether-outlandish revelation, given the US decision to ultimately pursue vaccine procurement unilaterally. Another much-publicised solidarity-eroding measure entailed the US hoarding, over the summer, three months' worth of the world stockpile of Remdesivir, a drug approved for clinical treatment of Covid-19. This left few doses for Europe or the rest of the world (US Department of Health and Human Resources 2020; Boseley 2020). These stories speak volumes of the state of the transatlantic community after almost four years of Trump's presidency. While social distancing might be the strategy of choice for individuals to slow the spread of the virus, at a time of global crisis it is unlikely to be the ideal approach within America's elaborate alliance network. In this case, too, "America First" has meant "America Alone" (Stephens 2017).

Relatedly, as the Trump administration has framed the virus *not* as a shared global emergency, *but* an external diffusion best combatted by turning inward, the situation certainly points to questions, or rather dilemmas, related to *freedom*. One tension exists between the *systemic* and *individual* variety. Many cities and states in the US have placed considerable restrictions on the freedoms of their inhabitants, something that appears to intuitively run against the grain of the whole American experiment – a favourite recent talking point on the right of the political spectrum in the United States (Welna 2020; Müller 2020). Such problems are not limited to the United States, of course. Most democratic states in the world are still grappling with the imposition of drastic restrictions on individual freedoms and with (re)asserting sovereignty in ways unfathomable less than a year ago (Krastev 2020; Tharoor 2020). The restrictions can of course be framed – and rightly so, one might argue – as necessary measures in the here and now so that citizens of countries can still enjoy (both *negative* and *positive*) freedoms in the future, but fears have also been raised that once freedom of movement is restricted, going back to the *status quo ante* might not be a simple affair (Birnbaum 2020; Alden 2020). Original Publication III in this

[92] Of course, there is another way trust is relevant in the midst of the pandemic, namely *public trust* in authorities, in their ability to deal with the crisis and to deliver accurate and undistorted information on the pandemic. In this way, trust plays a role in determining how effective a response states can muster up (Al-Marashi 2020; Inglesby 2020; Pew Research Center 2020; Schrar 2020) – in terms of the study's framework this pertains to the intrinsic image and the functioning of the state.

dissertation presents a hypothetical state of affairs, the European continent under a nuclear cloud robbing people of meaningful choices, and hence positive freedom(s) – in retrospect, the example could just as well have been constructed with a view towards a pandemic. At the moment, the US and the European states do not, therefore, seem all that divided in (un)freedom, despite the fact that their respective approaches to the pandemic have not been particularly well coordinated. Survival has, for the time being, trumped freedom.

In sum, these short reflections on the pandemic point to peculiar, even tragic manifestations of hegemonic failure on the part of the United States both at home (the intrinsic image) and abroad (the socio-institutional image). The US is not only further squandering its domestic sources of (usable) power by mishandling the pandemic, it is showing neither the *will* nor the *ambition* required to assume leadership. On the international arena, then, the implementation of the "Trump doctrine" against the backdrop of the pandemic has been tantamount to abdication, and has clearly undercut the socio-institutional foundations of US hegemony.

However, given the fluid situation, there are three caveats. First, the US has still shown it can leverage the role of the dollar and act as a "lender of last resort". This is a tangible manifestation of how the hegemon's material might has, over time, bred a structural power advantage that allows it to distribute dollars – a commodity in high demand during a crisis – and also engage in massive stimulus spending (Norrlof 2020; see also Kitchen and Cox 2019). Second, the coming presidential election may yet provide a course correction, although the deeper drivers, whether material or ideational, that brought Trump to power will not disappear overnight. There is thus no guarantee that a new heading will hold in the stormy seas ahead, but it remains a possibility (Wright 2020b). Third, no other actor seems to be stepping up to fill the leadership void left by the American hegemon. China's reaction to the current crisis has been riddled with its own, largely self-inflicted, blunders. These, too, flow in part from the intrinsic image, namely the need for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership to project narratives that legitimise domestic rule (Gill 2020; Kallio 2020). The so-called "middle powers", meanwhile, can only pick up so much slack in the absence of even a semblance of camaraderie between the two most important states in the system (cf. Jones 2020; Marston and Wyne 2020).

One should always be wary of assuming that pandemics are by definition transformative (Nye 2020; Aaltola *et al*. 2020), and it is still too early to tell whether the current one is. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has certainly functioned as an "accelerant" (Ashford and Shifrinson 2020). It has made ever more obvious that the world has entered an unpredictable impasse, one marked by the advent of a holistic brand of US-China great-power competition that impedes international cooperation

on manifold global governance fora.[93] The inherent tragedy herein is that the US, at least with its current leadership, is so engrossed in a zero-sum competitive mindset and so possessed by internal strife in the country that it remains incapable of heeding to William J. Burns's (2019) advice about shaping the future parameters of international order while it still has the opportunity. Instead, the US seems intent on committing the ultimate hegemonic failure by hastening its own demise. We may thus be witnessing the opening stages of a slow and painful "hegemonic suicide".

###

After reflecting on these extraordinary pandemic times, it seems apt to end on a less disheartening and more forward-looking note. The theoretical exposition on the tripartite hegemony framework as well as the four original publications mining hegemonic failure have provided but one multifaceted yet incomplete account on the state of America's hegemonness. Like any story, unexplored plotlines and hitherto unseen vistas have remained in the background, never quite making it to the surface. It is thus high time to engage in a short introspective and self-reflective exercise regarding the present study, point towards future avenues of research, and provide a short synthesis of the insights attained.

To begin, in hindsight, the original publications could have grappled more explicitly with the possible linkages between the material image, on the one hand, and the hegemon's order-building narratives, its trust-building forays and articulations of freedom, on the other. This would have served to make more explicit the material baseline, which, one can argue, remains a scaffold of sorts for any study of great-powerhood. Facing the question of material capabilities head on would likewise have better illustrated the value-added of a socio-institutional approach to the study of hegemony, underlining potential shortcomings of a capabilities-based understanding of power dynamics in the process – an oversight that the reflections on the Covid-19 pandemic admittedly sought to rectify, at least in part.

Similarly, when it comes to the intrinsic image, an even more robust analysis of the ebb and flow of different foreign policy ideas within the various formal and informal fora – wherein key policymakers exist as embedded actors – could have been undertaken. The coronavirus pandemic illustrates that when it comes to engaging with the world outside, a focus on foreign policy debates (and debaters) provides but one partial reflection of the kinds of ideas floating around in various contexts during an age of incessant information barrage; think of the pointed attacks on expert knowledge, especially from the right of the political spectrum in the United

[93] For a recent contribution involving the present author as regards the holistic nature of the competition, see Sinkkonen and Gaens (2020).

States. In addition, especially in light of the socio-institutional image, more emphasis, perhaps even original research, on the views of other states, their leaderships and populaces, especially in the Middle East but why not also in Europe, could have added more depth to the studies. Admittedly, though, such refinements would likely have lengthened the research process unduly and run into resource and access constraints – perhaps, then, they will fall into the folder labelled "future research projects".

There is one more related issue, one that is even more directly linked to the transnational nature of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study has admittedly sought to provide a multifarious picture of US hegemony by dealing with the realm of the ideational, while being attentive to levels-of-analysis questions. It has also grappled with related problems of anthropomorphism, illustrated how a hegemon's order-building narratives link up the global, regional and domestic arenas, and demonstrated how articulations of freedom by the powerful may also entail commitment to bottom-up processes of institution-building. How well it has succeeded in these endeavours remains for the reader to decide. At the same time, however, for some the body of work above is likely to appear lamentably conventional. The dissertation deals with the hegemon as an international *actor* (or its leaders as embedded actors), enabled, constrained and constituted by *social structures* in the international arena (comprised largely of states), and functioning through *relationships* (with, for the most part, other states). Perhaps a study dealing specifically with a *global* governance issue, whether in the cyber domain, on climate governance or pandemic prevention, could have been included. This would have shone light upon the manifold non-state actors that can both prop up and undermine hegemony, providing an additional layer of depth to the analysis. It would certainly have offered a further avenue for exploring potential hegemonic failure, and brought to the fore different ways of tying together and problematising the images of hegemony.

In spite of these limitations of the research, it is the sincere hope of the author that this dissertation has indeed made a contribution to enhancing our understanding of American hegemony, and the possible failures of the hegemon, as we embark upon the next decade of the 21st century. One can venture that the three-image hegemony framework, along with the theoretical innovations put forth within the four original publications – namely the notion of order-building narratives, the three levels of trust, the two-triangle framework for the analysis of freedom, and the nascent building blocks of the "Trump doctrine" – indeed open up avenues for further research, engagement, critique and refinement. As the short reflection written against the backdrop of a pandemic that affects all our lives has sought to illustrate, such future forays could take place beyond the regional and temporal contexts,

international relationships and value constellations that were ultimately the focus of the current study.

As a whole, the theoretical edifice and the original publications speak to the inherent difficulty that the US will inevitably face when it comes to exercising hegemony in an ever more complex world (and it is safe to say that such troubles would befall any other putative hegemon as well). This dissertation has sought to illustrate that these challenges, however, are not merely a function of the perceived decline in America's relative material power or the manifold internal travails that erode the United States' "usable power". The prospect of failure also resides in, and may thus spring from, the realm of the social, the ideational, the institutional, and the relational. Hegemony is ultimately also about (domestic) policy ideas that inform a sense of hegemonic purpose; about articulating compelling hegemonic visions of order, embedding them in institutions, and striving to realise them through policy implementation; about managing at times fraught relationships with allies, friends, and even foes; and about the building and nurturing of a shared value base within the hegemonic core. These are insights that theorists of hegemony, not to mention practitioners of foreign policy, ignore at their peril. It thus remains incumbent upon students of the international arena to contribute, in a multifaceted manner, to our understanding of power dynamics, also in a new post-pandemic world.

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27 October 2020
Helsinki, Finland

Abbreviations

CBO	Congressional Budget Office
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
COVAX	Covid-19 Vaccine Global Access (Facility)
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CUSPP	Center on US Politics and Power
DPA	Defence Production Act
EU	European Union
Fed	Federal Reserve
FIIA	Finnish Institute of International Affairs
G20	Group of Twenty
G7	Group of Seven
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
HST	hegemonic stability theory
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INSTEX	Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges
IR	International Relations
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps
ISA	International Studies Association
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MENA	Middle East and North America
MNC	multinational corporation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NSS	National Security Strategy
OAS	Organization of American States
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SARS-CoV-2	Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SEC	Global Security Research Programme
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreements
UN	United Nations
UNGA	General Assembly of the United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

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