

Question of US Hegemony and COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract *A key feature of contemporary international politics is the changing nature of American presence on the world stage. Before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, power of the United States (U.S.) as a unipolar superpower was experiencing change, giving way to multipolarity. For the past three decades, America was the predominant global power, leading the international response to every man-made or natural crisis and calamity. This time, however, the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic has undermined the American ability to lead the international community in managing the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. By its very nature, COVID-19 is challenging prevailing international norms of hard and soft power. This paper critically evaluates the role of American power, its central position in the international political economy and global governance to highlight how deeply it is embedded in the international order, and suited to mount a global response to an international challenge.*

Key Words: Hegemony, COVID, politics US, China

Introduction

The end of the Cold War in 1989 led to emergence of the United States (U.S.) as the predominant hegemon in the international system. It had the capabilities to project hard power around the world. It had resources to exercise its hegemonic power on other states due to unequal distribution of power. A global hegemon plays a pre-eminent role in organising, balancing and stabilizing the world political economy (Buff, 2003). America deepened its cold-war era alliances, which it formed to contain the Soviet Union. Even further back, when U.S. emerged as a major power at the end of World-War II, it was one of the leading powers when the new international order and institutions were established in 1945. It had unmatched industrial prowess, wealth and military capabilities at its disposal. The United States application of power comes in the form of hard coercive power and diplomatic soft power. For example, it has been observed by many that the United States uses its soft power to embed and promote its liberal culture and values, merged with a strong educational system. This contributes towards the strengthening of the United States values and culture across the world and indirectly maintains dominance.

Gradually, the U.S. hegemony has been challenged. Shifting of economic power to Asia particularly, China over the past 15 years had changed dynamics of international politics and economy. The financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath is termed as the defining moment of the rise of Asia, as China led the measures stabilise international economy and supported growth. Resultantly, the prevalent American

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hegemony is under pressure. This paper argues against this notion and states that the U.S. hegemonic power has gradually transformed and become more fragmented due to the rise of multipolar world order: economic and military rise of China, resurgence of Russia, deepening of strategic tensions in Asia, Europe and the Middle East. It is argued that the presence of U.S. leadership in global governance remains relevant even today, even as coronavirus pandemic rages. In recent weeks, China and the U.S. have locked horns on origins of Coronavirus and actions of the World Health Organisation (WHO), a United Nations (UN) body leading international response against COVID-19. The case-study of WHO and China-US clash will highlight that in fact, US hegemonic leadership is far from over, as the salient features of the US influence is embedded in the functioning of the international regimes.

The paper is divided into three interrelated parts. First part aims to draw up upon the existing scholarship on the nature of the US hegemony, and how far the existing literature can be used to understand the current challenges being faced by the US due to the emergence of Asian economies, especially China. It illustrates how the rise of China is posing a threat to the US hegemonic leadership. It also aims to critically analyse the emergence of the multipolarity during past thirty years; the emergence of Asian economies, and especially China and how it is challenging the US hegemonic structure. Parallel to this, interlocked nature of the Chinese and the United States economy and their interdependence upon each other is illustrated. This will showcase that both of the superpowers must cooperate.

The second section focuses on the on-going China-US spat related to WHO and their respective roles in international regimes. It explores the extent to which the US interests and political agendas are deeply implanted in the formation and functioning of the international system. Moreover, the US foreign and economic policies still have a huge impact on the other states due to the structure of international organisations. Hence, one cannot decisively state that the time of US hegemonic leadership is over, as the US still plays a vital role in the global world order.

The final part concludes that the US hegemonic leadership still exists although its nature and position has been transformed in the preceding years and so. The critical role executed by the US in the global world order, specifically global power politics and the economy is deliberated in depth in this paper.

Rise of the Rest and Challenge to U.S. Hegemony

There have been many studies showcasing how the US hegemonic structure and global economic dominance will eventually be overtaken by the rise of the rest, alluding to BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China). A study carried out by Goldman Sachs speculates that the BRIC countries' GDP and productivity will be more than of the U.S.; with the US' GDP almost equivalent to only 75 percent of China by 2050 ([Smith, 2016](#)). Making the US no longer the main driver of the world economy. Among these nations, the Chinese economy is nearly competing with the U.S. In 2018, in terms of GDP, the Chinese economy stood at \$13.8 trillion, while, the U.S. economy was estimated to be at \$20.5 trillion in terms of annual GDP growth, as per the World Bank Data. When ranked for Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), often rated as the better indicators, Chinese economy has already overtaken the America. World Bank estimates that in terms of PPP, in 2018, China's GDP stood at \$22.5 trillion and the U.S. was \$18.2 trillion. This shows that rise of China poses a huge threat to the US hegemonic leadership and its economy ([Arrighi, 2005](#)).

The rise of the Chinese economy has transformed the world economy with it, thus projecting a direct threat to the US hegemonic leadership, if we consider this scenario in terms of a realist perspective. Realists such as Waltz and Hans Morgenthau posit regarding the nature of hegemony states that the hegemon must excel in virtually all elements of physical power and wealth. "A states hegemonic power structure depends on how it scores on all of the following indicators: size of population and territory, economic capability, military strength, political stability, and competence in diplomacy" ([Rosenau & Durfee, 1995](#)). Hence, the rise of China undermines the status quo and the interests of the US according to the realist paradigm.

Moreover, one of the most integral features of the realist interpretation of hegemony is the 'hegemonic stability theory', which rests on the principle of 'balance of power' (Grundy, 2012). The hegemonic stability theory indicates for a stability in international order only one dominant power is required within the international system. In this context, the rise of China's economic dominance can easily be translated into political power, which is a direct challenge to the US state-centric interest. China's rise as the next major economic power has resulted in a shift of global production towards China. Resultantly, American manufacturing sector lost nearly 15 million jobs between 1995 and 2000. (Fernandez, 2007). Showcasing the threat China poses to the US hegemony. It should be kept in mind that the collapse of a hegemony primarily occurs by two factors: the deterioration in a hegemon's military capabilities, and/or its economic growth stagnates. Hence, the rise of the Chinese economy is of concern to US hegemony (Herrington, 2011).

As a rising superpower, Beijing has put forward an alternative view of international politics. China propagates the notion of building a 'community of shared destiny' and a 'harmonious world'. In Beijing's viewpoint, this envisions China playing a crucial role in peace building and economic development world-wide (Foot, 2013). This directly challenges the self-interest-based paradigm of the U.S. Also, the impact of China's expanding economic and political influence can be seen around the world. For example, China has made revival of ancient trade routes its strategic and economic interest by the construction of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as "President Xi Jinping looks forward to connect China once again with Caspian region and European states on the one hand, and South Asia and Middle East on the other". (Rafi et al., 2016). The BRI has international strategic importance for China and increases its global influence. Recently, China announced "a freight train service from the Zhejiang province in eastern China all the way to London" (Gramer, 2017). This will allow China to strengthen its diplomatic influence with Europe and to compensate for the geopolitical pressure China is facing in the South China Seas from the US and Japan. This further project how even the closest allies of the US are becoming a part of China's project, showcasing a shift from the unipolar world order under the shadow of the US and making the US hegemonic power more fragmented.

Thus, it can be observed how the 'balance of power' is being altered due to the growing Chinese influence in Asia and beyond, which is a direct challenge to the US hegemonic leadership. The Balance of power ensures that no state is strong enough to dominate all other secondary states, as many secondary states tend to bandwagon or form an alliance with the more powerful states rather than unbalancing the international system. Therefore, the rise of China and the shift in the distribution of capabilities is a salient feature of the self-help anarchic system in balancing the distribution of power, if we consider it along the lines of realism structural as advanced by Waltz 'Theory of International Politics (Lobell, 2019). China's grand strategy of 'open regionalism' is directed towards transforming Asia into a neutral zone between the US and China, by constructing a global economy that is not dependent on the American market (Fernandez & Hogenboom, 2007). Hence, the rise of China can be seen as a stabilising tool for the US hegemonic influence by balancing the distribution of power.

Moreover, the formation of the BRIC countries can be seen as balancing the influence of the US and projecting a shift towards multipolar world order. For example, due to the BRIC countries in the G20 summit the West was forced to take an account of the demands of the developing countries. This further depicts how the US influence is gradually transforming and becoming fragmented and it no longer holds the same authority it used during the Cold War era (Fernandez & Hogenboom, 2007). As the Asian economies are strengthening, they can collectively oppose the influence of the unipolar world order under the umbrella of the US, leading to a transformation in the US hegemonic structure. Further projecting how the US hegemonic power is becoming fragmented. Yet, despite, growing economic prowess BRIC countries, it must be underlined that the US still executes a critical role in the global arena. The US through its hard power still retains its hegemony over military, cyberspace, world seas. While through the application of its

soft power the US dominates the international institutions, education systems, political discourses, and its strategic alliances ([Joseph, 2001](#)).

US-China Competition and COVID-19

As the international community, and world economy grapples with COVID-19, the U.S. is increasingly ratcheting heat on China straining relations between two superpowers. When the coronavirus emerged in China, President Trump swiftly moved to impose travel restrictions on January 31, 2020. It effectively blocked entry of all foreigners who had visited China during past 14 days ([Proclamation on suspension, 2020](#)). Next when the number of cases and deaths increased in the United States, the current administration, led by mercurial Donald Trump blamed China for not being transparent about the virus in the early stages of breakout. President Trump went even further and termed coronavirus as 'Chinese Virus' ([Trump, March 2020](#)). His administration didn't stop there. He publicly endorsed a theory that COVID-19 has its origins in Institute of Virology based in Wuhan, implying that it was deliberately manufactured ([Sevastopulo & Manson, 2020](#)). Even though, the U.S. Intelligence Community has publicly stated that there is no scientific evidence that COVID-19 was man-made or 'genetically modified' ([Hosenball, 2020](#)).

By the end of April, the U.S. government was preparing proposals to seek compensation from China for the damages caused by the outbreak of coronavirus. Two ideas being discussed are whether to punish China or demand financial damages, which would overturn the accepted international legal doctrine of 'sovereign immunity' that protects foreign states from lawsuits in domestic courts ([Stein et al. 2020](#)). An idea being debated is, if to cancel part of debt America owes to Beijing, which could have huge unintended repercussions for the global economy.

Undoubtedly, Beijing has pushed back. It has consistently denied any wrongdoing on initial handling of the pandemic. At first, Chinese diplomats also pushed supported the claims that coronavirus was created and planted in China by the U.S. Later, while this claim was not repeated officially, Chinese diplomats in various European and Asian countries, took to Twitter to criticize Trump administration and its failings in dealing with the pandemic ([Kang, 2020](#)). For instance, spokesperson of Chinese Foreign Ministry Hua Chunying tweeted on March 19 that "China has been updating the US on the coronavirus and its response since Jan. 3. And now blame China for delay? Seriously?" ([Chunying, 2020](#)). Meanwhile, Chinese Ambassador in Netherlands went a step further, and termed President Trump's 'Chinese virus' description as 'racism' and 'political virus to international solidarity and cooperation in fighting COVID-19' ([Hong, 2020](#)).

In an op-ed for the *Washington Post* Chinese Ambassador to the United States has clarified that China was sharing information related to COVID-19 from the "earliest possible time", and relevant agencies of two countries related to disease control were in "close communication" from "January 4, the day after China briefed the WHO". He asserted that "Blaming China will not end this pandemic", rather this mindset can lead to "de-coupling China and the U.S." and hurt "coordination to reignite the global economy" ([Tiankai, 2020](#)). It appears that Beijing doubts good intentions of President Trump who has a history of propagating conspiracy theories and promoting 'fake news', while claiming to discredit them. From Beijing's perspective, Trump is looking towards the upcoming presidential elections in November and aims to manipulate pandemic for electoral results in his favour.

WHO and Impact on its International Image

World Health Organisation as an international organisation is playing a central role in coordinating international response towards COVID-19. WHO maintains liaison with the member states of the UN through its country offices. The main focus of WHO's work in the pandemic is to share information with member states. Members of the UN, proceeded to adopt national policies on figuring out the next steps based on the information shared by the WHO. Even the name of the virus was given by the WHO. ([Naming the coronavirus disease, n.d.](#)) WHO continues to share details related to number of cases and

fatalities received from national governments with the international community. These functions of WHO is the founding purpose of WHO as an international organisation. The core function of WHO is collection and dissemination to Member states information relevant to general public health and related issues. The key purpose of WHO is 'cooperation' among member states and others to "promote and protect health of all peoples" (Constitution, n.d.).

This role of WHO has come under scrutiny as COVID-19 pandemic has spread across the globe. China and WHO stated that Beijing alerted WHO on January 3 about an unknown strain of virus and maintain close communication thereafter. Credibility of WHO has come under intense questioning because of a tweet shared on January 14, which held that "Preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission" of COVID-19 (World Health Organisation-Twitter, 2020). Later, China also, denied permission to WHO experts to visit Wuhan, the first epicentre in the initial days, as cases started emerging in Wuhan. WHO only gained access after a visit to Beijing by Director-General Tedros Adhanom, who met with President Xi Jinping. (WHO China leaders, 2020). The failure of WHO to declare an international emergency at the early stage has also come under criticism. Initially on January 22, WHO has reluctant to declare a 'public health emergency of international concern' (Statement on the meeting, 2020). It only did so, after visit of its Director-General to China, on January 30.

For the next five weeks, WHO did not raise the alert level. After China had controlled spread of disease on its territory, particularly, in Wuhan and Hubei province, that WHO declared coronavirus a pandemic on March 12 (WHO announced COVID outbreak a pandemic, 2020). This was despite the fact that by early February, cases were being reports across Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. Meanwhile, WHO continued to speak highly of China's response to contain spread of epidemic, particularly, "rigorous use of non-pharmaceutical measures. This according to WHO provided crucial lessons for global pandemic response.

United States, however, pushed back. President Trump directly attacked WHO, terming it 'China-centric', claiming that WHO made wrong recommendations in the beginning, leading to worsening of the situation (Trump, April 2020). Republican Senator Marco Rubio demanded resignation of DG Tedros, because he enabled "Beijing to use the WHO to mislead the global community" (Rubio, 2020). The United Nations Secretary General, however, backed the embattled WHO stating "WHO must be supported as it is absolutely critical" in fighting the pandemic. (Statement by Secretary-General, 2020). Even WHO head maintained that his agency 'didn't waste time' while responding to the new coronavirus, and declaration of international health emergency on January 30, provided 'the world enough time to intervene' (Lovelace, May 2020).

WHO Funding Cuts

As an international organisation and a UN body, WHO runs on contributions from the member states, multilateral organisations donations from philanthropists, and the UN budget. In 2019, half (51 percent) of the budget was contributed by 194 UN member states, 16 percent by the UN, international organisations and international development banks, and 15 percent came from philanthropic institutions (Beech, 2020). Remaining was provided by non-governmental organisations and private sector. \$5.6 billion was the total budget of WHO for two years of 2018 and 2019. During that period, the U.S. made the largest contribution of nearly \$893 million among UN member states. Meanwhile, China provided nearly \$86 million during 2019.

On April 14, 2020, President Trump ordered immediate halt of on-going financial support to the WHO, while ordering a review to examine role of WHO in 'severely mismanaging and covering up the spread' of COVID-19 (Smith, 2020). This decision came at a time when WHO had launched an appeal for emergency funding of nearly \$675 million to support efforts against coronavirus worldwide.

Freeze of funding by the biggest donor of WHO has led to criticism of the US as the leading international power with the responsibility to lead international response against pandemic. In response, Beijing announced emergency support of \$30 million to the WHO in support of its pandemic relief activities. It was second Chinese financial support to the WHO in two months, where first commitment was \$20 million ([Shih, 2020](#)). This indicated that while Washington was retreating from supporting international organizations, Beijing is stepping up its role, as it seeks to expand its international influence.

China COVID-19 Related Aid

As the COVID-19 outbreak first happened in China during January-March, 2020, it gave China a crucial advantage compared to rest of the world: when rest of world started dealing with coronavirus challenge, China had already defeated it. As rest of global economy shut down, Chinese economy and industrial production opened up. With it, emerged global demand for masks, medical equipment, testing kits, personal protective equipment for the healthcare professionals, and ventilators to boost healthcare system worldwide. At this time, world turned to China for assistance. China also stepped up to showcase its credentials as the responsible global leader.

Starting March 20, Chinese government announced that it will provide emergency medical assistance to over 80 countries, WHO, African Union. This assistance comprised testing kits, masks, and protective equipment. Meanwhile, China also offered cooperation in sharing health technology, and its medical experience of dealing with the pandemic. ([MFA, 2020](#)). By April 10, however, China had sent face masks, testing kits, and protective suits to over 125 countries, and four international organizations. Similarly, it had dispatched 13 medical teams to 11 countries including Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Serbia and Cambodia. Chinese medical experts also held over 70 video conferences to share their experience and data with national authorities and international organizations. (China says it has help over 130 countries, 2020)

Meanwhile, during the month of March, commercial procurement of medical supplies from China also accelerated. According to figures released by China Custom, from March 1 till April 4, China exported nearly 4 billion masks, 37.5 million protective suits, 2.8 million testing kits, and 16000 ventilators among other equipment. These supplies were valued at \$1.4 billion. ([Yiran, 2020](#)) At the same time, until April 29, according to Chinese figures, Beijing had provided nearly 4 billion masks to the United States. (Tiankai, 2020)

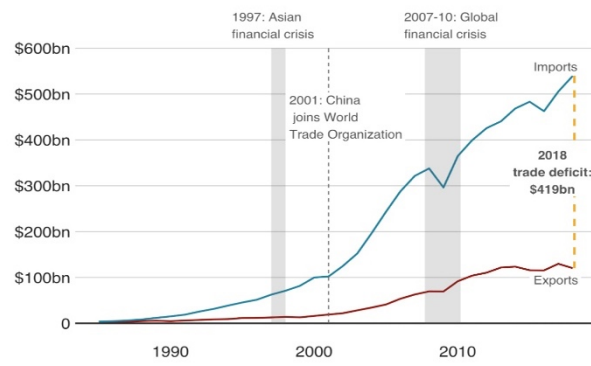
United States Assistance to fight COVID-19

As developing countries deal with the economic fallout of COVID-19, the U.S. has provided emergency funding to support communities in developing countries, shore up humanitarian initiatives, and back scientific studies to develop a vaccine. Till May 1, 2020, various U.S. government agencies and departments have cumulatively committed nearly \$775 million to support global efforts against COVID-19. This includes \$99 million in emergency health assistance to USAID for Contagious Infectious Disease Outbreaks, \$100 million for supporting on-going global health programs of USAID, \$300 million to support humanitarian programs of USAID, and more than \$150 million of economic support funds to government and civil societies organizations in nearly 100 countries ([State Department, 2020](#)). Moreover, the U.S. government through State Department has provided funds to countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America to support their economic response to pandemic. Meanwhile, U.S. funds are supporting wide-ranging activities, primarily led by USAID. These include, trainings for healthcare personnel on PPE usage, cleaning and disinfection protocols, and setting up isolation centers among others. Meanwhile, economic support programs are helping government provide financial assistance to vulnerable families, small businesses, and ensure emergency services in far-flung areas.

U.S-China Trade

It must also be highlighted, that the Sino-U.S. relationship is a complex bilateral engagement in the world. It is crucial to highlight the interdependence between the two economies, as China and the US have the highest amount of trade among each other. In 2018, America traded most with China, then any other country in the world. As per official data, "U.S. goods and services trade with China totalled an estimated \$737.1 billion in 2018. Exports were \$179.3 billion; imports were \$557.9 billion. The U.S. goods and services trade deficit with China was \$378.6 billion in 2018." (US-China trade facts n.d.). This trade imbalance has been at the heart of US-China trade war in recent years. Both sides have imposed tariffs and counter-tariffs to balance the trading relationship. Meanwhile, China is the largest external holder of U.S. Treasury securities, worth \$1.1 trillion until April, 2019 (Morrison, 2019). This showcases the interlocked nature of both of the economies and how essential it is for both of the nations to cooperate, because if the American economy suffers, then the Chinese economy suffers too, and vice versa.

US Trade Deficit with China has Soared Since 1985



Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-48196495>

Future of Hegemony Amid Pandemic

Prior to the emergence of coronavirus disease and the ensuing pandemic, the international order formed after World War-II was beginning to fragment. The complex interdependence within nations borne out by international regimes and organisations was under threat. This was due to the unequal distribution of power and its impact on the asymmetrical functioning of the international system. It allowed the United States to exert its power over the weaker nations to maintain its hegemonic leadership dominance (Keohane & Nye, 2000). Ensuring the sustainability of the US hegemonic leadership for example, Susan Strange has highlighted that institutions such as World Bank, IMF and other organisations established under the shadow of the US leadership are the tools of the American grand strategy to maintain its hegemony (Strange, 1987). Moreover, the United States is one of the largest contributors to the World Bank, UN, and as noted earlier of the WHO. This financial support has allowed Washington to dominate the agenda of international organisation and impose Western economic agenda on the developing countries. With the rise of China and the other Asian nations, a change has been underway for past few years.

China has been challenging the military and economic interests of the U.S, the geopolitical guarantor of the prevailing Western-led international order. Beijing began by challenging first at the regional level, and then later at the global level. This came at a time when the Trump administration pushed for an 'America-First' foreign policy, leading to stress on its traditional alliances in the Asia and Europe. Trump administration also weakened multilateralism, leaving a vacuum and paving the way for China to fill it. This is evident in the

current pandemic, as China has taken a lead. Washington is trying to play catch up now. This reflects a world increasingly fraught with disorder, and American hegemony under duress. Yet, if Washington pursues its agenda, it has the capabilities and tools to enforce it.

COVID-19 is the first international crisis where China is leading the global response, in contrast to the U.S. Meanwhile, Washington is spending more capital on criticizing China for its role in the spread of outbreak. This is unlikely to earn Washington favorable points across the developing world. As COVID-19 becomes the starting point of a new Cold War between China and the U.S, it could also herald emergence of new era of hegemony where both sides will push for policies that favor them. In this way, it enables U.S. to play a proactive role in post-pandemic international politics.

As the world's leading economy, and the country which retains significant influence in international financial institutions, the role of the U.S. is crucial for revival of international economy after the pandemic. This point has been acknowledged by the Chinese government as well. China, alone cannot lead recovery of international economy. The complex interdependence between China and American will force them to explore avenues for mutual cooperation, despite tensions. Even though, strategic rivalry will drive bilateral relationship between China and the U.S., and also influence their engagement with third countries.

As the US-China tensions increase, multilateralism is also coming under pressure. The recent Washington-Beijing spat on WHO is an indication of how things can worsen if leading superpowers don't engage in dialogue. While U.S. retains capacity to influence global institutions, China has also earned the capabilities to frustrate their functioning, as is evident at the UN Security Council. To avoid clash, both sides need to prioritise multilateralism to advance their respective foreign and economic interests.

At the same time, it must be noted that although Asian powers are emerging, the US still maintains the largest political influence worldwide. For instance, the US uses foreign aid as a form of political persuasion to make the weaker nations abide to the United States' long-term agenda of maintaining its hegemonic leadership. Foreign aid is often used as an instrument of the United States foreign policy to further influence and dominate other governments. Despite the pandemic, and China leading the aid to developing countries, the U.S. maintains the largest capability to deliver aid world-wide. The American experience of mobilising aid on vast scale to support communities under threat is unparalleled.

Conclusion

The United States hegemonic leadership has transformed and has become fragmented, and no longer holds the same position that it used to in the post-Cold War era and after the dismantling of the USSR. This is due to the rise of a multipolar world order, for example, the rise of Chinese economic and political dominance and other emerging BRIC countries, coupled with post-

9/11 challenges. However, it cannot be decisively stated that 'the time for the United States hegemonic leadership is over'. The US still retains its hegemonic leadership influence in the global arena due to strong alliances, its leadership qualities and widespread ideological influence.

Current COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to alter the international power distribution. As China is leading the international response as a global superpower in the pandemic, it heralds a wake-up call for the United States. Since American has been the power behind setting up of modern international institutions, it retains its hegemony and influence over international organisations. It only requires the will to act. Under President Donald Trump America is going through a peculiar phase. Yet, complex economic interdependence between China and the U.S. will force cooperation for economic recovery after the pandemic. That will be the moment for the U.S. to assert its power across the world as the hegemon.

In conclusion, even though BRIC countries and China in particular boast a very powerful economy, they are unable to dismantle the American hegemonic leadership completely. Although the system of

polarity undergoes a continual change, the foundation of the US rests on a solid political system that enables the United States to maintain its hegemonic leadership. Hence, the strong dollar and stability of the United States economy remains attractive to the investors, leading to a continuance of the era of US hegemonic leadership in the international world system.

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