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Review by **Huiyun Feng**, Griffith University

There are good reasons to study Russia, China, and U.S. hegemony now. Facing common threats from the West, Russia and China have been moving closer since the 2010s. Are they going to finally form an alliance against the United States? Will these rising powers seriously challenge or shake up the liberal world order that is built on U.S. hegemony? With Russian annexation of Crimea and China's assertive diplomacy in the East China Sea as well as in the South China Sea, will a military conflict between the hegemon and rising powers be inevitable in the future? In a word, will "the ill winds"¹ from China and Russia, to borrow Larry Diamond's phrase, pose fatal challenges to U.S. hegemony and world democracy?

Michael Mastanduno's "Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending US Hegemony after the Cold War" provides an innovative way to look at the challenge to U.S. hegemony from Russia and China. This work is part of a forum on "Hegemonic Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,"² organised by *Security Studies* in 2019.³ Mastanduno tries to answer an important question: why did the U.S. adopt different strategies to cope with Russia and China after the Cold War? The rationale for adopting divergent approaches to Russia and China, for Mastanduno, is their "relative significance within America's regional hegemonic orders" (480); "China emerged as critical to the management of US hegemony in East Asia and sufficiently influential to undermine it," while "Russia was neither vital to the management of America's European hegemonic order nor capable of subverting it" (480). Therefore, the United States set harsh terms in the spirit of "take it or leave it" towards Russia given its non-lynchpin role for U.S. hegemony in Europe.

¹ Larry Diamond, *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, And American Complacency* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).

² G. John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, "Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders," *Security Studies* 28:3 (2019): 395-421.

³ Michael Mastanduno, "Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending US Hegemony after the Cold War," *Security Studies* 28:3 (2019): 479-504.

In contrast, the United States adopted more accommodating policies towards China due to China's lynchpin importance in Asia.

Russia gradually turned into a non-lynchpin revisionist state in Europe, thus a hegemonic spoiler for U.S. hegemonic order in Europe. China is rapidly evolving into a lynchpin state in East Asia but it is also "sliding from a status-quo partner into a revisionist hegemonic challenger" (487). In the end, both Russian and China are threatening the American hegemonic orders, but for different reasons and via different means. U.S. hegemony, according to Mastunduno, is more likely to sustain in Europe than in Asia because China is more challenging than Russia for U.S. regional order.

Lynchpin, Partner Politics, and the Future of International Order

The concept of lynchpin state is a creative way to look at the relationship of rising powers with the hegemon, particularly in building and sustaining hegemonic orders. Lynchpin states are a double-edged sword for the hegemon. They are the most important secondary states "with potential, on the one hand, to undermine the hegemonic order, and on the other hand, to meaningfully assist its management and maintenance" (487). As Mastanduno argues, they are "vital to the hegemon's effort to hold its overall order in place and assure that it moves forward ... Lynchpin states are indispensable, and their successful incorporation is essential to it [sustaining hegemonic order]" (487).

On the other hand, lynchpin states are neither static nor constant in nature, and they can evolve and change. Given the weight and significance of the lynchpin states for the hegemon, there is a risk involved in terms of how to restrain the lynchpin state from turning against the hegemon, i.e. turning into a revisionist lynchpin. Germany and Japan evolved into lynchpin states for the U.S. hegemonic orders, but some status quo lynchpin states almost crossed over the margin to revisionist states with systemic impact (488). For example, Great Britain is seen as "a status quo partner" on the lynchpin margin. France during the 1960s is an example of a U.S. partner almost turning into a revisionist state, although France is not a lynchpin state for the U.S. according to Mastanduno. China used to be a lynchpin supporter for U.S. hegemony in Asia after the Cold War. However, "with China's remarkable growth underwritten and supported by the United States, the US-China bargain became a victim of its own success" (503). By 2017, in the eyes of U.S. policy makers, China had changed from a lynchpin supporter to a lynchpin hegemonic challenger.

By highlighting partner politics and the hegemon's strategic choices, Mastunduno challenges some illusions of the so-called liberal international order. The conventional view of the post-war international order is that it is open and liberal with universal democratic values. In G. John Ikenberry's words, the Western liberal order is "hard to overturn and easy to join."⁴ However, Mastanduno's article suggests that "despite the rhetoric of universal inclusivity, liberal hegemonic orders are easier for some to join than for others, as the terms of entry are largely dictated by the dominant state" (481). In particular, Mastanduno has shown that Russia faced more difficulties in integrating into the liberal order than China. This realist underpinning of U.S. hegemony explicitly challenges Ikenberry's liberal argument that the liberal international order is too good to fall in the future, no matter whether U.S. hegemony will sustain it or not. If the liberal order is not that "liberal" and

⁴ See G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* 87:1 (January-February 2008): 23-37.

“easy to join,” but determined and sustained by the hegemon’s self-interest, the decline of the hegemon will logically lead to the fall of the liberal order as well.

Besides the challenges from rising powers, Mastunduno also pinpoints the danger of the hegemon’s own self-destruction of the hegemonic orders. It is clear that Mastunduno is not a big fan of U.S. President Donald Trump’s foreign policy; he writes, “Trump’s transactional approach to foreign policy downplays the value of partner relationships by casting partner bargains as episodic and zero-sum rather than long-term and mutually beneficial” (504). In particular, Trump’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has frustrated U.S. allies and partners in Asia, damaged U.S. legitimacy, and more importantly, offered China an unprecedented opportunity to rise as a central player in the Asia Pacific. Therefore, Mastunduno concludes that the durability of the U.S. hegemonic order actually depends on the willingness of the U.S. to defend it. If the U.S. decides to give up its hegemony, no matter what or how well its partners do, the U.S. hegemonic order will fall.

This self-destruction of U.S. hegemony argument is similar to Jennifer Lind and William Wohlforth’s thesis in their recent *Foreign Affairs* article. They suggest that the liberal order is in danger not because of revisionist authoritarian states challenging the status quo, but because “for the past 25 years, the international order crafted by and for liberal states has itself been profoundly revisionist, aggressively exporting democracy and expanding in both depth and breadth.”⁵ Here, Lind and Wohlforth seem to target all liberal states, instead of Trump’s transactional foreign policy per se. However, a similar conclusion remains: the real destroyer of the liberal international order is not the so-called rising powers, but the hegemon and its associates, who hold an illusion that they can turn the whole world in the ‘liberal’ direction.

Three Unaddressed Questions

This paper is certainly a significant contribution to IR debates on hegemony, alliance politics, and multilateralism because it has moved from previous hegemony studies of hegemonic stability or hegemonic wars to a new direction of looking at the hegemonic orders and ordering, particularly in sustaining and managing such orders.⁶

Despite the insightful arguments, Mastunduno seems to have left some questions unanswered, which also point to directions for future research. The first question is about the durability of partner bargaining between the hegemon and lynchpin states. Although the success of the U.S. in establishing hegemonic orders in the post-WWII era was not accidental, there is no denying that the German and Japanese cases are exceptional. As defeated countries, Germany and Japan had no choice but to accept what the U.S. arranged for them, both domestically and internationally. This is understandable because “a hierarchy-clarifying great-power war” can explain why Germany and Japan became the “lynchpin supporter” in the post-war era. Mastunduno seems to argue that Germany and Japan will defend the US hegemonic orders in Europe and Asia respectively, no matter whether the U.S. itself requests such actions. However, there is one unanswered question: why have these two states remained the hegemonic supporters for U.S. hegemony in the post-Cold War era? How do

⁵ Jennifer Lind and William C. Wohlforth, “The Future of the Liberal Order is Conservative: A Strategy to Save the System,” *Foreign Affairs* 98:2 (March-April 2019): 70-80, at 70-71.

⁶ G. John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,” *Security Studies* 28:3 (2019): 395-421.

we explain the durability of partner bargaining between the United States and its lynchpin partners? In other words, if China can change from a lynchpin supporter to a hegemonic challenger as Mastanduno has suggested, under what conditions would Germany and Japan turn into a lynchpin challenger?

The second unanswered question is about U.S. strategic choices regarding lynchpin states. Mastanduno suggests that the U.S. did not treat Russia as a lynchpin state, but saw China as a lynchpin for U.S. hegemony. This strategic choice of who is lynchpin and who is not has shaped the United States' divergent approaches to Russia and China. One wonders, in this case, why U.S. policy makers made such a strategic decision in the first place? Soon after the Cold War, then Russian President Boris Yeltsin enthusiastically embraced the West, ideologically and strategically. Even so, Russia was rejected by the West.⁷ At the same time, China was sanctioned by the West after 1989. It seems that China was far more challenging to the West in the post-Cold War era, ideologically and strategically. It is puzzling as to why U.S. policy makers rejected Russia but accommodated China after the Cold War. Although Mastanduno's lynchpin argument is intriguing, it appears to be an ad hoc or post hoc explanation that serves to justify the different strategies of the U.S. towards Russia and China after the Cold War.

One alternative explanation for America's different strategies comes from balance of threat theory. Although Yeltsin's Russia was eager to join the West, its military power was still a formidable threat for U.S. policy makers, no matter whether Russia became a democracy or not. Therefore, it was in the interest of the U.S. to keep Russia down in Europe. As Lind argues,

In Europe, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States and its allies did not preserve the status quo. Instead, they pushed eastward, enlarging NATO to absorb all of the Soviet Union's former Warsaw Pact allies and some former Soviet territories, such as the Baltic states. At the same time, the European Union expanded into eastern Europe. In Ukraine, US and European policymakers encouraged the overthrow of a pro-Russian government in 2014 and helped install a Western-leaning one.⁸

The distrust of Russia's resurgence and its potential to seriously threaten the West was the motive behind all these provocative actions. In other words, the real reason that the U.S. did not treat Russia harshly is not because Russia is an insignificant, non-lynchpin state, but because Russia is too threatening to accommodate.

China is a different story. Although the Chinese economy started to grow phenomenally after Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up in 1978, its military power was far inferior compared to that of the U.S. or Russia. As Thomas Christensen argues, China was posing problems but not catching up with the U.S.⁹ The huge military capability gap between the U.S. and China eroded China's threat level, thus for the U.S. it was acceptable to adopt an accommodating policy towards China for 25 years in the post-Cold War

⁷ James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: US Policy toward Russia after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

⁸ Jennifer Lind, "Asia's Other Revisionist Power: Why US Grand Strategy Unnerves China," *Foreign Affairs* 96:2 (March-April 2017): 74-82, at 78.

⁹ Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for US Security Policy," *International Security* 25:4 (Spring 2001): 5-40.

era. In other words, the so-called lynchpin identity is not determined by U.S. policy makers per se, but constituted by these countries' military power and threat levels to the United States.

Applying this “balance-of-threat” logic to the German and Japanese cases, we can hypothesise that if these two countries were to develop their own military capabilities, enough to potentially pose a threat to the United States, the U.S. would also treat them as revisionist states and thereby adopt harsh policies, as it did with Russia after the Cold War and with China after 2017.

The last unanswered question concerns the future of U.S. hegemony. Mastanduno is more optimistic about U.S. hegemony in Europe than in Asia because Russia is too weak to challenge and China is too strong to be deterred. However, this optimistic view is based on two assumptions; first, that the U.S. will not change its existing policies towards Russia and China, and second, that Russia and China will not change their revisionist nature towards the international order.

These two assumptions are problematic. Trump has planned to reset the U.S. relationship with Russia despite domestic opposition. If the U.S. eventually changed its hostile policy towards Russia, Russia might become a strategic asset for the U.S. to balance against China globally. On China, Trump seems to worry more about trade and economic issues than strategic and security agendas. Moreover, China itself claims that it is a defender of the current American-built international order. If the United States and China can resolve the “trade war” peacefully, China might turn back to a status quo lynchpin supporter for U.S. hegemony.

The future of the U.S. hegemonic order is neither as optimistic, nor as pessimistic as Manstanduno has suggested. Instead, it remains unwritten in nature and full of uncertainties. However, one clear point strongly suggested by Manstanduno is that the United States will play a key role, positively or negatively, in shaping the future international order, in which the United States may or may not be the hegemon, but at least will be a lynchpin state—an order shaper. If that is the case, will the U.S. serve as a lynchpin revisionist or lynchpin status quo state? A related question is even more intriguing: if China (or another rising power) becomes the hegemon, and thus the order maker, sustaining the basic rules and norms of the current international order, will this order with the old rules but a new leader continue to be seen as a liberal international order for the West? We can be sure that the study of hegemonic orders and lynchpin states will not decline with U.S. hegemony.

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