

CRITIQUE OF THE CRITIQUE: WHY REALIST OPPONENTS OF LIBERAL HEGEMONY MISS THE TARGET?

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Abstract: There is an intense debate within the United States on whether it should continue with its current grand strategy of liberal hegemony or replace it with a more restrained foreign policy. Among the opponents of liberal hegemony, four prominent realist international scholars distinguished themselves: Christopher Layne, Barry Posen, Stephen Walt, and John Mearsheimer. However, their critique is flawed on two accounts: (1) they do not define liberal hegemony properly, and (2) liberal hegemony is actually a far more realist strategy than they argue. In this paper, the author criticises the realist critique in three steps. First, he points out that the critics do not answer the question of what hegemony as a state's status in the international system is, and consequently, whether the U.S. is a hegemon or wants to become one. Second, he shows that the critics fail to deliver a convincing argument that the current U.S. grand strategy is liberal in its content as it is in its source. Third, he applies the critics' own theories to the U.S. foreign policy case to show that liberal hegemony is in fact a realist grand strategy. The author's ultimate goal is to make space for a better critique of liberal hegemony, which would still be realist but with the addition of some moderate liberal arguments.

Keywords: liberal hegemony; grand strategy; realism; liberalism; the United States.

INTRODUCTION

In his “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, issued in March 2021 to serve as a temporary replacement for the National Security Strategy of the United

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States (on which work is still in progress), U.S. President Joseph Biden expressed the idea that “our world is at an inflection point in history”, “in the midst of a fundamental debate” about its future direction, centred on the question of whether “democracy can still deliver for our people and for the people around the world”, or “autocracy is the best way forward” in times of “accelerating global challenges” (The White House 2021, 3, 23). Invoking democracy as a central value to defend and an antipode to autocracy was not just Biden’s reflection on the observed anti-democratic international and domestic trends. It was clear that U.S. foreign policy also found itself at an inflection point, with Biden obviously siding with those who would want to continue with its existing course, known as the grand strategy of liberal hegemony (Trapara 2021, 124). In short, liberal hegemony is U.S. policy which aims at creating a hegemonic world order led by the United States for the sake of inherently American liberal values. Yet since the inception of this strategy after the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a unipolar international system, there has been debate over whether the United States should stick to it or replace it with a more restrained foreign policy. This debate has been especially intense since the first huge U.S. foreign policy failures became apparent, sometime around the middle of the first decade of the 21st century.

In this paper, I deal with four prominent international relations scholars who adhere to the realist school of thought and are widely seen as the biggest critics of the liberal hegemony grand strategy. My focus is on four distinguished books they published on the topic, although I also use their other works: Christopher Layne’s *Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (2006); Barry Posen’s *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (2014); Stephen Walt’s *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (2018); and John Mearsheimer’s *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (2018). Common to all four authors is the argument that at least since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been pursuing a grand strategy of liberal hegemony, which has been unsuccessful, costly, and damaging to the U.S. national interest; therefore, it should be replaced with a realist grand strategy of restraint/offshore balancing. However, their critique has two main flaws: it lacks an appropriate definition of liberal hegemony and it ignores the actual realism of this grand strategy, rooted in the critics’ own international relations theories.²

If one wants to criticise something, he should first clearly define what it is. The definition of liberal hegemony I presented in the previous paragraph is abstract enough so that all the critics could fit into it, yet the problem arises when it comes to the interpretation of its main elements. “Liberal hegemony” consists of two terms:

² My critique of the critique is not the first of a kind. Michael Fitzsimmons (2019) published an article in which he criticised Posen, Walt, and Mearsheimer, as well as David Hendrickson, a liberal critic of liberal hegemony.

“liberal” and “hegemony”, both of which should be properly defined if U.S. grand strategy was to deserve this label. What is hegemony? Liberal hegemony is liberal in what sense? Realist critics did an unsatisfying job when answering both questions. The third question is whether the current U.S. grand strategy is actually a realist one. The critics say it is not, deciding in favour of restraint/offshore balancing, which in their opinion is a realist alternative. Yet, to support such an argument, they should rely on the proper application of their own international relations theories to the case of U.S. foreign policy, and this is a task they also do not perform well. The rest of the paper is therefore divided into three main sections, dealing with: defining hegemony and whether the United States is a hegemon (or wants to become one); explaining in what sense U.S. grand strategy is liberal (and in what sense it is not); applying the critics’ realist international relations theories to the U.S. case to show its grand strategy is far more realist than the critics argue. In the Conclusion, I present what the real realist critique of liberal hegemony should look like.

U.S. HEGEMONY IS...

For two reasons, hegemony should be defined separately from liberalism. First, it is important to establish whether U.S. foreign policy is actually hegemonic. If it was not, it would be sufficient to call it liberal foreign policy, and the critique could be reduced to the critique of liberalism. Second, a clear definition of hegemony is necessary to determine whether U.S. foreign policy is a *status quo* or a revisionist one. If it was revisionist, then the critique would be better justified, for revisionism is automatically more expensive and risky compared to a policy that defends the *status quo*. There are two ways in which a state’s foreign policy can be hegemonic: if the state is already a hegemon in the international system and wants to retain this status; or if the state is not a hegemon but wants to become one. In the former case, we speak of a *status quo* foreign policy, while in the latter, of a revisionist one. And if a state is neither a hegemon nor aspires to become one, its foreign policy cannot be labelled hegemonic at all. Thus, to define hegemony as *policy*, hegemony as *status* should be defined first – what does it mean to be a hegemon in the international system? Is it just the position of the most powerful state in the system, or some other quality that is needed? Only then could we answer if the United States is a hegemon and whether its foreign policy is a *status quo* or revisionist one – or whether it is not hegemonic at all. The critics missed doing this appropriately.

In *The Great Delusion*, John Mearsheimer (2018, 8) emphasises the significance of precise definitions of the concepts used in scholarly studies. Yet hegemony is apparently not among these concepts³ – he defines it only once: “The ideal situation

³ “Five basic concepts” which Mearsheimer (2018, 18) considers “essential” for his study to be precisely defined are: “culture, groups, identity, political institutions, and society”.

for any state is to be a hegemon, which effectively means being the only great power in the system” (Mearsheimer 2018, 134). On other occasions, Mearsheimer (2018, 2, 122, 130, 139) underlines that liberal hegemony as foreign policy is possible only under circumstances of unipolarity in the international system, which in effect means that there are no great powers in the system other than the unipole. From this, we could conclude that Mearsheimer equates hegemony as status with unipolarity, or the absence of other great powers from the system, which would mean the U.S. has actually been a global hegemon during the entire post-Cold War period, and its foreign policy has been of a *status quo* nature. Yet this clearly contradicts his earlier book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, which added a new quality to the concept of hegemony – “domination of the system”, whether global or regional (Mearsheimer 2001, 40). Mearsheimer (2001, 415) understands this domination as transforming the organising principle of the system: “if one state achieves hegemony, the system ceases to be anarchic and becomes hierarchic”.⁴ However, he argues that global hegemony is “virtually impossible” due to “the stopping power of water”, which prevents states to “conquer and control” distant regions (Mearsheimer 2001, 41). Thus, according to Mearsheimer’s *Tragedy*, to qualify as a hegemon, it is not sufficient for the state to possess preponderant (unipolar) power. A degree of domination, conquest, control and hierarchy over others is also needed, yet these concepts are almost completely absent from the understanding of hegemony in *The Great Delusion*. Instead, Mearsheimer (2018, 122–123, 137–138, 149–151) speaks of the hierarchy only in the context of the possible creation of a “world state”, the feasibility of which he denies by similar arguments to those he uses against global hegemony in *The Tragedy*. It is obvious that there is confusion among Mearsheimer’s works over what hegemony as a status exactly is, and consequently, whether the U.S. is an actual global hegemon (or is it even feasible to become one). The logical outcome of his definitions of hegemony and great powers from *The Tragedy* would be that the essence of U.S. global hegemonic strategy is in attempting to transform the international system from anarchy to hierarchy by imposing its domination over the two remaining great powers – Russia and China – which is a bad policy because the “stopping power of water” prevents its feasibility. But Mearsheimer falls short of arguing anything close to this either in

⁴ In this fashion is Mearsheimer’s (2001, 381–382) argument in *The Tragedy* that the only great powers in the contemporary international system besides the United States are China and Russia. The United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan – regardless of their great power potential – do not qualify as great powers “because they depend in large part on the United States for their security; they are effectively semi-sovereign states”. In *The Great Delusion*, however, he denies Russia and China’s great power status, calling them “major powers”. (Mearsheimer 2018, 162). And in one of his later articles, he nevertheless admits that since 2016 both China and Russia have been great powers, which was the fact that transformed the international system from unipolar to multipolar (Mearsheimer 2019, 8, 42).

The Tragedy or *The Great Delusion*. Instead of resolving the issue of hegemony, Mearsheimer focuses on liberal elements of U.S. foreign policy, which actually makes him a critic of liberalism, in effect excluding hegemony from the equation.

In *The Hell of Good Intentions*, Stephen Walt also fails to define hegemony apart from liberalism. He says this strategy is hegemonic “because it identifies America as the “indispensable nation”” uniquely qualified to spread liberal values and institutions (Walt 2018, 14). The fact that a state thinks of itself as indispensable is hardly a satisfactory basis to consider it a hegemon or its foreign policy hegemonic. Although Walt (2018, xi, 15–16, 31–32) argues that in the wake of the Cold War, the U.S. “achieved a position of primacy unseen since the Roman Empire”, he also states that in 2016 the world was no more unipolar, with Russia and China significantly stronger than they had been, which leaves the issue of whether the U.S. at this moment is a hegemon or wants to become one unresolved. Yet in one of his earlier works (before the alleged decline of unipolarity), Walt (2006, 22–23) stressed the difference between primacy and hegemony, arguing that the U.S. was indeed “more than the first among the equals”, but still not a global hegemon which could “physically control the whole planet” or “make other states do what they want”. As with Mearsheimer, the possible solution could be to build on this definition and consider the U.S. a revisionist power that aims to impose its hegemony on Russia and China, but Walt does not argue this. Instead, he also sees revisionism, not in hegemonic, but in liberal elements of U.S. foreign policy – the reason the U.S. is not a *status quo* power lies in its ambition “to create a liberal world order” through the active use of its power (Walt 2018, 23). If both Mearsheimer and Walt, in their most recent books critical of U.S. grand strategy of liberal hegemony, actually do not see hegemony itself as a source of trouble apart from its liberalism, then the question naturally arises – would they consider some kind of illiberal hegemony better?⁵

Barry Posen (2018, 26) is the only one among the critics who touches on this issue, denouncing Donald Trump for pursuing illiberal hegemony as “primacy without purpose”. Yet in *Restraint*, he also leaves confusion over what primacy/hegemony is.⁶ In his words, the strategy of liberal hegemony is hegemonic “because it builds on the great power advantage of the United States relative to all other major powers and intends to preserve as much of that advantage as possible through a range of actions, including a sustained investment in military power whose aim is to overwhelm potential challengers so that they will not even try to compete, much less fight” (Posen 2014, 5). This would imply that the U.S. pursues a *status quo*

⁵ Fitzsimmons (2019) also concludes that Walt and Mearsheimer put too great emphasis on the “liberal half” of liberal hegemony while underestimating hegemony, with which according to this author “most of the evidence they marshal about U.S. foreign policy failures has much more to do”.

⁶ Primacy is actually the term Posen used for a variant of U.S. grand strategy before he employed the concept of liberal hegemony (Posen and Ross 1996–1997, 32–43).

foreign policy aimed at preserving its hegemonic position. Yet, Posen (2014, 67–68) explicitly says, “it is not a *status quo* policy” because it is “inherently expansionist and seems destined to drift regularly into military action”. Why, if the U.S. only wanted to maintain its already attained status? In addition to blaming liberalism for this, as his colleagues do, by criticising Trump, Posen admits that pursuing hegemony even without liberalism is a source of trouble, but still fails to decide whether the U.S. only wants to keep its relative preponderant power over others, deterring them from challenging it, or is an expansionist actor who wants to impose some new quality of relations on its competitors.

In *The Peace of Illusions*, Christopher Layne comes closest to a decent definition of hegemony, which consists of five elements. First, hegemony is about “raw, hard power” – militarily, no state can “put up a serious fight” against a hegemon; economically, a hegemon has “economic supremacy” and “preponderance of material resources”. Second, it is about the hegemon’s ambitions – “to create a stable international order that will safeguard its security and its economic and ideological interests”. Third, it is about polarity – a hegemon is the only great power in the international system, which is therefore unipolar. Fourth, hegemony is about a hegemon’s will to exercise its power “to impose order on the international system”. Fifth, hegemony is about structural change – quoting Robert Gilpin, Layne concludes that when a great power achieves hegemony, “the system ceases to be anarchic and becomes hierarchic” (Layne 2006a, 4). Layne then applies this definition to U.S. foreign policy and its position in the international system. According to him, since the early 40’s of the 20th century, the U.S. has pursued an expansionist grand strategy of “extra-regional hegemony”, aiming “to establish its hegemony in the world’s three most important regions outside North America itself: Western Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf” (Layne 2006a, 3). Layne (2006a, 5) argues that the U.S. “to a great extent” attained the status of an extra-regional hegemon. He points out that during the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy was not simply counterhegemonic (aimed at preventing the Soviet Union from achieving hegemony), but that it imposed its own hegemony on Western Europe, Germany, and Japan, preventing the independent foreign and security policies of these local actors (Layne 2006a, 55–57). As the Soviet Union remained the only check against U.S. hegemonic ambitions, Washington sought to eliminate it as a peer competitor from the very beginning of the Cold War (Layne 2006a, 50–51, 58, 62–64). Layne (2006a, 106, 111–113) correctly observes that the U.S. did not withdraw from Europe after the Cold War because it still pursued extra-regional hegemony there and even expanded it on the former Soviet sphere of influence by “double enlargement” of NATO – “not only extending NATO’s geographical scope but broadening its mission to encompass regions beyond the Alliance’s boundaries”. It is clear that Layne, starting from his own definition of hegemony, considers U.S. foreign policy both hegemonic and revisionist: after achieving regional hegemony, it went for an extra-regional one, and later even expanded its scope. Still, he differentiates between hegemony and universal empire; in

hegemony, there are still sovereign states with the potential to balance against a hegemon (Layne 2006a, 149–150). Yet even Layne does not dare cross the threshold that his colleagues have also avoided: arguing that the United States’ ultimate ambition is to achieve global hegemony (or universal empire) by imposing hierarchic relations on Russia and China, the two remaining great powers with independent foreign and security policies. Stopping at arguing that the U.S. maintains its already achieved extra-regional hegemony, Layne contradicts his own remark about the expansionist aims of U.S. grand strategy.⁷

Two conclusions can be derived. First, save for Layne, realist critics of liberal hegemony failed to offer a clear definition of hegemony as a state’s status in the international system, which makes their critique more pointed at liberalism than at hegemony. This is the topic of the next section. Second, although all four authors admit that U.S. foreign policy is not a *status quo* one, none of them argues this is because the United States wants to become a global hegemon by imposing a hierarchy on the remaining great powers in the international system (Russia and China).⁸ Without such an argument, labelling U.S. foreign policy as revisionist, or even hegemonic, is unconvincing. With Mearsheimer, Walt, and Posen, this is a consequence of poorly defined hegemony (although Mearsheimer could have applied his definition from *The Tragedy*), and with Layne, of poor application of his otherwise decent definition to contemporary international relations. Failure to resolve the hegemony issue exposes the realist critique to counter-arguments from both realist and liberal proponents of the current U.S. grand strategy. For example, realists Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (2016, 128–129, 156) deny this strategy is

⁷ As a matter of fact, only a year after publishing *The Peace of Illusions*, in his debate with Bradley Thayer, Layne argued that the U.S. was actually a global hegemon – the most powerful state and the only great power in the system – yet with an expansionist foreign policy aimed at creating an “empire” (Layne and Thayer 2007, 51, 55, 57–58, 61–62, 67). In one of his other works from the same period, there is an apparent confusion between his understanding of the *status quo* and expansionist policies: “Although some scholars argue that, as a hegemon, the United States is a *status quo* power, its grand strategy is actually a peculiar mix. The United States is a *status quo* power in that it aims to preserve the existing distribution of power. However, the United States is also an expansionist state that seeks to increase its power advantages and to extend its geopolitical and ideological reach. To preserve the *status quo* that favours them, hegemonies must keep knocking down actual and potential rivals; that is, they must continue to expand” (Layne 2006b, 13). This confusion would be easy to remove if Layne just admitted that the U.S. sought to eliminate the remaining great powers (Russia and China) as independent actors from the international system – as he did regarding U.S. policy towards the Soviet Union.

⁸ Possibly the only realist who comes close to such an argument (although he never authored a book against liberal hegemony) is Randall Schweller. He argues that after the Cold War, the United States pursued “revisionism in the guise of liberal hegemony”, aiming to make “all states, including authoritarian major powers such as Russia and China... supplicants in an American-dominated world order” (Schweller 2018, 44).

hegemonic (they prefer calling it “deep engagement”), unless hegemony is defined in a minimalist way – as “relative, not absolute, and that it concerns the preservation of the *status quo*, not revisionism”, which means that a hegemon is “a state that has the largest share of material capabilities in the system”, without making “any judgement about the character of influence or the logic of political relationships that exists within the global system”. A minimalist definition of hegemony is also present in the work of a liberal, John Ikenberry (2020, 63) (who prefers the term “liberal internationalism”), for whom “hegemonic order reflects the efforts of the predominant state to use its economic and military capabilities to promulgate and underwrite a set of rules and institutions that add regularity and predictability for actors large and small”, differing it from empire by the fact that in hegemony “the lesser powers retain their sovereignty as well as considerable manoeuvring room and even influence on the leading state”. If the critics wanted to beat these “benign” definitions of hegemony, they should develop their own, more “malign” definition.

...NOT THAT LIBERAL...

The second issue with the definition of liberal hegemony is to determine in what sense it is liberal. There are two possible senses. First, liberal hegemony could be liberal in its source – liberal ideology could motivate hegemonic foreign policy because a liberal state cannot feel safe in a system that also contains illiberal states unless it achieves hegemony. Second, it could be liberal in its content – such a foreign policy would have liberal ends (supporting the open economy, spreading liberal democracy, and building liberal international institutions) and prefer liberal means (diplomacy over the military, “carrots” over “sticks”) for achieving them. If U.S. foreign policy was liberal on both accounts, then we might say liberalism would have priority over hegemony – the latter in service of the former – and the critique of such a policy could focus on liberal elements rather than hegemonic ones (as our critics actually do). If it was liberal only in its source but had illiberal ends and means in its content, we could still call it liberal hegemony, but it would be clear that hegemony is the priority – liberalism is just an excuse and a means of legitimising a hegemonic policy. To realist critics, U.S. grand strategy is liberal in both its source and content, yet their arguments regarding the latter are unconvincing. It is interesting that, in their earlier works, they did not even use the term “liberal”, although they all had appropriate labels for U.S. hegemonic grand strategy. In his pioneer work about offshore balancing, Layne (1997) spoke of U.S. “preponderance” and, in a later debate with Bradley Thayer (2007, 51–102, 121–137) of “empire”. Mearsheimer (2001, 234–266) in *The Tragedy* even denied the U.S. hegemonic ambitions, considering them an offshore balancer, but somewhat later (2011, 18–19), admitted Washington’s “imperial” grand strategy of “global dominance”. Posen (with Ross) (1996–1997, 32–43) and Walt (2006) opted for the

term “primacy”. Yet, in time, they have settled on the term “liberal hegemony”, giving liberalism a defining quality in the contemporary U.S. grand strategy.

Christopher Layne is, in fact, the only critic who does not explicitly label U.S. hegemony “liberal”. Yet, from his description of its sources and contents, it is clear that liberalism plays a decisive role in both. According to Layne (2006a, 7–10), “U.S. overwhelming material capabilities” after World War II and especially during the Cold War gave it only “the opportunity and the means” to seek hegemony, but the motive for this he finds in the liberal (Wilsonian) “Open Door” school of thought. This school assumes that the United States cannot be secure unless it creates an “open door” international system, which means a world order open for U.S. economic (open international economy) and ideological penetration (spreading democracy and liberal institutions) (Layne 2006a, 29–36). Thus, the U.S. seeks hegemony in order to create an “open door” world; without this liberal motive, it could have made a different grand strategic choice: “the U.S. grand strategy is both ambitious and expansionary precisely because it is predicated on the belief that the health of America’s core values at home is linked to the maintenance of an Open Door world abroad. Liberalism imposes a logic on the U.S. grand strategy that causes overexpansion” (Layne 2006a, 119–120). Layne (2006a, 121–122) sees liberalism as intolerant of competing ideologies and a source of the American “crusader mentality”, which leads it towards seeking regime change in nondemocratic states and imposing its own values on the rest of the world. Yet he is a bit contradictory here – first, he says that U.S. policymakers “believe that a world of many democracies will be peaceful and stable” according to democratic peace theory, but then he denounces this theory’s validity and calls it “a handy pretext for intervening in the internal affairs of regimes it considers troublemakers” (Layne 2006a, 121). The dilemma of whether U.S. policymakers genuinely believe in peace and stability brought by spreading democracy, or use democratic concerns only as a pretext for actions against disobedient regimes, remains unresolved by Layne.

Mearsheimer (2018, 1) defines liberal hegemony as “an ambitious strategy in which a state aims to turn as many countries as possible into liberal democracies like itself while also promoting an open international economy and building international institutions”. The source of this strategy is the “crusading mentality” of liberal states, based on their universalistic view of individual rights, which makes them feel responsible for intervening in other states’ internal affairs, aiming to turn them into liberal democracies (“with the ultimate goal of creating a world populated solely by liberal democracies”) and include them in the open world economy and international institutions (Mearsheimer 2018, 2, 8–9, 120–128).⁹ According to

⁹ According to Mearsheimer (2018, 171–172; 2019, 23), NATO expansion to the east and Western involvement in the Ukraine crisis were also based on liberal principles and aimed at promoting “democracy and Western values”.

Mearsheimer (2018, 157), when a state adopts liberal hegemony, it develops “a deep-seated antipathy toward illiberal states” and tends “to see the international system as consisting of good and evil states, with little room for compromise between the two sides”, where “unconditional surrender becomes the order of the day”. Yet he contradicts his own argument about U.S. universalistic view of individual rights when he admits that Washington rarely treats foreigners as equals, citing several examples of American insensitivity to foreign casualties or reluctance to use force for humanitarian purposes when U.S. citizens were not involved (Mearsheimer 2018, 140–141). Moreover, he argues that most of the time, liberal democracies act “according to realist dictates” and “have little difficulty conducting diplomacy with illiberal states”, citing examples of the U.S. forming alliances with “murderous dictators” and even overthrowing hostile democratic regimes during World War II and the Cold War, going “to great lengths to disguise such behaviour with liberal rhetoric”, yet he does not present convincing evidence that Washington changed this pattern of behaviour after adopting liberal hegemony (Mearsheimer 2018, 157). Mearsheimer (2011, 29) actually presented the opposite in one of his earlier works, citing the U.S. thwarting democracy in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Walt (2018, 14) argues that liberal hegemony is liberal “because it seeks to use American power to defend and spread the traditional liberal principles of individual freedom, democratic governance, and a market-based economy”. It is “an ambitious effort to use American power to reshape the world according to U.S. preferences and political values”, a grand strategy that “seeks to expand and deepen a liberal world order under the benevolent leadership of the United States” (Walt 2018, 53–54). Walt (2018, 55–56) finds intellectual foundations of liberal hegemony in liberal theories of international relations (democratic peace, economic liberalism, and liberal institutionalism), which together imply that the U.S. “could foster a more prosperous and peaceful world by spreading democracy, promoting economic globalisation, and creating, expanding, or strengthening international institutions”. He delivers the ultimate argument about the liberal content of U.S. grand strategy: “U.S. primacy was, for the most part, not used to keep dangerous adversaries from attacking the United States or vital U.S. interests”, but “to shape the international environment according to U.S. preferences, to topple authoritarian leaders at odds with Washington, or to advance broadly liberal objectives” (Walt 2018, 63–64). Yet he admits that “the commitment to spreading liberal principles did not prevent Washington from supporting authoritarian governments... or keep it from turning a blind eye to human rights abuses practiced by close allies... nor did Washington seem overly concerned about the human costs its policies inflicted on others” (Walt 2018, 68). And in one of his earlier books, Walt (2006, 37–38, 42) goes to great lengths to actually suspect the liberal character of U.S. foreign policy, as when he cites examples of selective support for free markets (in sectors where U.S. firms were competitive, while applying protectionist practices in others) or argues that

“no U.S. president has been willing to risk much blood or treasure solely to promote democracy or to advance human rights”.

Posen is actually the only realist critic of liberal hegemony who does not admit any deviation of U.S. foreign policy from its alleged liberal content. He considers U.S. grand strategy liberal “because it aims to defend and promote a range of values associated with Western society in general and U.S. society in particular – including democratic governance within nation-states, individual rights, free markets, a free press, and the rule of law”. Spreading these values is seen by the proponents of liberal hegemony as essential for U.S. security: “The view is that the United States could only be truly safe in a world full of states like us, and so long as the United States has the power to pursue this outcome, it should”. According to Posen, this view originated even before Woodrow Wilson, with “the earliest ideas about the United States relative to the rest of the world”, which “were given new energy by the victory over Soviet totalitarianism and the sudden realisation that the United States might actually have sufficient power to spread its ideas about domestic governance and international order” (Posen 2014, 6).

In conclusion, in explaining in what sense U.S. grand strategy of liberal hegemony is liberal, realist critics present decent arguments for how liberal ideology motivates hegemonic foreign policy. Yet three of them occasionally admit that the actual performance of this strategy puts hegemony before liberalism, and the fourth one turns a blind eye to numerous examples of using liberalism only as a disguise for conducting hegemonic policy.¹⁰ Such examples are the focus of a liberal critic of liberal hegemony, David Hendrickson. In *Republic in Peril*, he argues that the U.S. supports the “Open Door” policy only in rhetoric, while actually undermining liberal order by subordinating trading interests to strategic calculations (for example, by using economic sanctions as a political tool), creating “public bads”, making international economic institutions biased in favour of Western societies, abusing new technologies for creating a “universal panopticon”, having double standards towards nuclear proliferation, etc (Hendrickson 2018, 39–42, 106–107, 122).¹¹ He openly challenges realist critics’ labelling of U.S. foreign policy as liberal, arguing that it actually “departed from liberal tradition in critical respects”, and that flaws in American-led world order “should not be attributed to liberalism but to a flock of ‘neo-isms’ parading in the guise thereof” (Hendrickson 2018, 211). Furthermore, a realist proponent of U.S. “imperial” grand strategy, Bradley Thayer, is clear that “if there is a tension between democracy and maintaining a pro-American

¹⁰ Not to mention the means of conducting this strategy, which all of the critics consider overly militarized and neglectful of diplomacy.

¹¹ Citing U.S. double standard regarding the right to national self-determination and the breach of its own democratic principles in Ukraine, Hendrickson (2018, 29–30) presents a clear counter-argument to Mearsheimer’s claim that liberal and democratic motives led the U.S. into the Ukraine crisis.

government, then the latter is the right choice for the United States” (Layne and Thayer 2007, 116). Also, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016, 75) consider promoting liberal economic order and supporting global institutions as the means for maximising domestic prosperity and securing “interstate cooperation on terms favourable to U.S. interests”. However, its chief liberal proponent, John Ikenberry, has made the ultimate argument that liberal hegemony as foreign policy is not quite what realist critics say it is. At the very beginning of *A World Safe for Democracy*, he argues that there is a misinterpretation of a famous Woodrow Wilson’s call “to make a world safe for democracy”. This phrase is typically understood – and the realist critics obviously adhere to this understanding – as “an idealist appeal to spread democracy worldwide” and “to remake the world in America’s image”, but it actually was “a call to reform the postwar international order so as to allow Western liberal democracy to survive” (Ikenberry 2020, xi). Thus, the essence of liberal hegemony is not in bringing democracy to every corner of the globe (as flawed realist critique claims), but in making such a world order (which would of course consist of authoritarian besides democratic states) in which the United States and other liberal democracies could be secure – and the proponents of this strategy obviously think that only a U.S.-led hegemonic order could provide this.

...BUT FAR MORE REALIST

So far, I have argued that the realist critics of liberal hegemony have missed defining hegemony properly and thus take the opportunity to criticise U.S. foreign policy as revisionism of an aspiring global hegemon, overestimating the liberal character of this grand strategy instead. Now I turn to discuss that the current U.S. grand strategy is not only less liberal in its content, but actually, far more realist than the critics would admit – according to the basic assumptions of their own theories.

The four scholars we deal with here are unambiguously realists, by both their own self-identification and others’ classifications. Only Mearsheimer is an offensive realist, while the remaining three adhere to defensive realism (Mearsheimer 2001, 4–14, 17–22; Taliaferro 2000–2001, 130, 135).¹² Regarding the neorealism/neoclassical realism divide, Layne and Posen certainly belong to neoclassical realism, while Walt and Mearsheimer initially were neorealists, but later also included strong elements of neoclassical realism (Layne 2006a, 7–8; Taliaferro 2000–2001, 135).¹³

¹² Layne is also labelled a defensive realist by his competitor in a debate, Bradley Thayer (2007, 104). Posen is included among the defensive realists because he adopts one of the cornerstone concepts of defensive realism – security dilemma (Posen, 1993).

¹³ In *Restraint*, Posen’s (2014, 21) elaboration of his understanding of international anarchy and the different strategies states employ to deal with it clearly points to neoclassical realist thinking. Both Walt and Mearsheimer, in their works, emphasise the impact of ideologies (nationalism, liberalism), which matter at the unit level of analysis.

It is important to have both defensive and offensive realists among the critics, to show that misinterpretations of liberal hegemony are featured on both sides of this divide. And the fact that all four of the critics are more or less neoclassical realists is significant because, namely, neoclassical realism is a theory of foreign policy (therefore also grand strategy), and due to its potential to be combined with the concepts from other schools of thought, it is the best realism we have for studying international relations in the 21st century (Rose 1998; Trapara 2017a).

The critics share the opinion that liberal hegemony is not a realist strategy but, as Posen (2014, xi) says, “unnecessary, counterproductive, costly, and wasteful”. They use several main arguments to claim this is a bad grand strategy. First, liberal hegemony ignores power relations and is likely to face balancing responses from other powers. According to Walt (2018, 54, 71), this strategy rests on “mistaken views of how international politics actually works”, ignoring that “imbalances of power make other states nervous”. Layne (2006a, 5–6, 150) considers geopolitical resistance to hegemonic strategy inevitable, as in former cases of unipolarity. Posen (2014, 31, 65) thinks this resistance will in time rise to the level of real balancing, as in Russia’s pushback against NATO enlargement, which is expected by balance of power theorists. And Mearsheimer (2018, 177) argues that Western liberal elites were surprised by the events in Ukraine because they believed realism and geopolitics were obsolete. Second, liberal hegemony drains American power and resources by involving them in endless wars, which leads to an “imperial overstretch” (Walt 2018, 259; Layne 2006a, 7, 155; Posen 2014, 60–68; Mearsheimer 2018, 2–3, 152). Third, supporting an open economy actually helps the rise of other powers (Layne 2006a, 152; Layne 1997, 109). Fourth, liberal hegemony clashes with nationalism, which is a stronger ideology than liberalism (Posen 2014, 22; Mearsheimer 2018, viii, 3). Fifth, it provokes terrorism and nuclear proliferation instead of preventing them (Walt 2018, 164–165; Layne 2006a, 7, 190). Lastly, it undermines liberal order at home. According to Mearsheimer (2018, 179), liberal hegemony does it by building a powerful national security bureaucracy to wage endless wars.

The alternative to liberal hegemony is a “realist” grand strategy, which Posen calls “restraint” and Layne, Walt, and Mearsheimer “offshore balancing”. Layne was the first to use the latter concept back in 1997. He understood offshore balancing as a defensive strategy, aimed at protecting U.S. territorial integrity and preventing the rise of a Eurasian hegemon (Layne 1997, 112). Given that the risk of Eurasian hegemony was small, Layne (1997, 113) assessed that the local states’ efforts could be sufficient to contain a potential hegemon. Using other states to balance against regional hegemons in Europe and Asia while U.S. troops remain “offshore” – in its own hemisphere – is the essence of offshore balancing/restraint. Only if local states failed, the U.S. should come “onshore” with its troops, but this is valid only for three regions of vital American interest: Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf (Walt 2018, 261–263; Mearsheimer 2018, 222–223). All four critics concur that there

is no potential hegemon at the moment in Europe, which means that NATO should be abandoned and European security left to the Europeans (Walt 2018, 269–270; Layne 2006a, 186–187; Posen 2014, 87–91; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016, 81–82). However, in Northeast Asia, there is a China threat, which should be contained by a carefully orchestrated coalition of its powerful neighbours (Walt 2018, 269; Layne 2006a, 186–187; Posen 2014, 91–98; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016, 81).

According to realist critics of liberal hegemony, the offshore balancing/restraint strategy is a more realist strategy, because it would allegedly succeed where liberal hegemony failed. It takes into account balance of power considerations, thus preventing the rise of a counter-hegemonic coalition against the United States and Washington's involvement in other powers' conflicts (Layne 2006a, 160–168; Mearsheimer 2018, 221–223). It is more sensitive to identity politics (the power of nationalism) (Mearsheimer 2018, 217). It saves American money so that it can be redirected to more urgent needs. (Posen 2014, 70, 163). It does not provoke terrorism and nuclear proliferation (Posen 2014, 71–87; Layne 2006a, 160). Finally, it protects liberal values at home (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016, 72; Mearsheimer 2018, 232–233).

The basic problem with the critics' arguments that liberal hegemony is more costly and damaging yet less realist strategy than restraint/offshore balancing would be is that they rest on a poor application of the critics' own realist theoretical assumptions to the U.S. case, and have already elaborated on an inappropriate definition of liberal hegemony. If the critics were to admit that the United States was a revisionist power that aimed to achieve global hegemony by eliminating the remaining great powers (Russia and China) from the system that would be consequently transformed from an anarchical to a hierarchical one, they could easily prove it was a bad strategy compared to a more defensive one, whose aim would be only to prevent other powers' regional hegemonies. Instead, they focus on criticising liberalism too heavily, while underestimating hegemony (although Layne does it less than the others). Liberal hegemony is indeed a costly and damaging strategy, but primarily because it is hegemonic, not because it is liberal – save for an indirect effect of liberalism as a motive for hegemonism, or the fact that some of the worst excesses of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War period were legitimated by liberal rhetoric.

Yet it still does not mean liberal hegemony is not a realist foreign policy – it actually is, by both offensive and defensive realism, if they were applied appropriately. As a matter of fact, the fundamental assumption of Mearsheimer's offensive realism is that hegemony is the best way for the state to ensure its security (Mearsheimer 2001, 21–22, 34–35). With one already mentioned exception – global hegemony is infeasible due to the “stopping power of water”, i.e., the inability to project sufficient power across oceans and seas to control distant regions. Given this, it is safe to say that the U.S., as an offshore power, cannot impose its control over Eurasia, making

a bid for global hegemony unrealistic – unless it does not. As Layne (2006a, 140–141; 2007, 68; 2006b, 22) argues and openly criticises Mearsheimer’s claim in *The Tragedy* that the U.S. is an offshore balancer, U.S. power in Eurasia has been pretty much onshore ever since World War II – especially in Europe, where its extra-regional hegemony even expanded to the east after the Cold War. Actually, if we look at the map of Eastern Europe, the eastern border of the current U.S. sphere of influence (measured by NATO enlargement) is farther to the East compared to that of the German sphere of influence on the eve of its invasion against the Soviet Union back in 1941 – if the “stopping power of water” did not prevent Germany from its hegemonic ambitions against Russia, it should even less prevent the United States. Why then, U.S. geopolitical offensive against Russia, aimed at completing European hegemony and encircling China from both land and sea, would not be a realist strategy from the standpoint of offensive realism?¹⁴ Yet it still does not mean it would be a successful policy, without enormous costs and a possible path to a catastrophe. But did not Mearsheimer himself have this in mind when he titled his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, acknowledging that the behaviour of great powers according to the dictates of offensive realism ultimately leads to – namely that – tragedy?

A U.S. bid for global hegemony can also be justified by defensive realism. Layne has always been aware that preponderance – what he initially called hegemony – is a realist strategy, in the sense of both offensive and defensive realism. According to him, defensive realists justify hegemony by three arguments: that a “balance of threats” prevents balancing against U.S. hegemony; that other states will bandwagon with the U.S. because it shows concern for their interests; and that the U.S. could look less threatening to others by relying on soft power (Layne 1997, 92–94).¹⁵ The “balance-of-threat” theory is Stephen Walt’s creation. Its basic assumption is that

¹⁴ When I presented this question to Mearsheimer in person, he defended his stance by pointing to the difference in contexts – while the Germans had a mighty army on Soviet borders, a U.S. military offensive against Russia would be infeasible, both due to the insufficient troops in NATO countries and the deterrence role of nuclear weapons. He did not think of the possibility that a hegemonic geopolitical offensive does not have to be directly military. As he also acknowledges, there are other means of interfering in major powers’ internal affairs short of the use of military force (Mearsheimer 2018, 152–153, 162). If the Cold War resulted in the Soviet Union’s collapse and regime change in Moscow without a single shot fired, then why wouldn’t U.S. establishment realistically hope for a similar outcome in the current geopolitical confrontation with the Russian Federation?

¹⁵ To be sure, he denied this later in *The Peace of Illusions*, arguing that defensive realism favours “more or less equal diffusion of powers”, yet he admitted that defensive realists explain expansionist grand strategies by the existence of “bad” and “greedy” states with “domestic pathologies” which make them “want more than security” (Layne 2006a, 16–17). Although defensive realists think of “domestic pathologies” in terms of illiberalism, it would be natural for a true realist – as our critics claim they are – to consider U.S. liberal ideology such a pathology.

states do not balance against the strongest state in the system, but against the one they consider the greatest threat, which besides aggregate power, depends on three additional factors: geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions (Walt 1985, 8–13). Most of the states in Eurasia thus do not consider the United States a threat, but quite opposite – a valuable ally against more proximate powers with perceived offensive capabilities and aggressive intentions. The abundance of disposable local allies surely facilitates U.S. expansion at the expense of Russia, China, and some rogue states such as Iran, and makes it quite a realist strategy. Posen (2014, 9) also admits that primacy (a strategy that preceded liberal hegemony) was initially favoured by some realists who thought the U.S. should remain at the pinnacle of world power. Among realists who support the current U.S. grand strategy surely is Bradley Thayer, who believes that only U.S. dominance ensures peace and stability as one “can count with one hand” countries that do not want to align with the United States (Layne and Thayer 2007, 106). Realists like Brooks and Wohlforth (2016, 1–71) base their support for “deep engagement” (another name for Layne’s extra-regional hegemony) on a denial that this strategy has been unsuccessful and that U.S. power is in decline. They also argue that both offensive and defensive realism predict security benefits for the U.S. from deep engagement (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, 94–101).

Bizarrely, realist critics of liberal hegemony are, in a way, liberal hegemonists themselves. Although their favourite offshore balancing is surely a *status quo* grand strategy, it still contains elements of both hegemony and liberalism. Neither of them puts into question U.S. regional hegemony in the Western hemisphere, or U.S. position as the most powerful actor in the international system. On the contrary, Mearsheimer and Walt (2016, 72) are quite explicit when they say that the “principal concern” of offshore balancing “would be to keep the United States as powerful as possible – ideally, the dominant state on the planet. Above all, that means maintaining hegemony in the Western hemisphere”. The critics’ are not isolationists – they see offshore balancing as a better strategy for keeping U.S. power in international relations than giving up on it. According to Mearsheimer and Walt (2016, 72), “by husbanding U.S. strength, offshore balancing would preserve U.S. primacy far into the future and safeguard liberty at home”. Posen (2014, 69–70) emphasises “power position” as the most important component of national security, understanding it as “national capabilities relative to other key actors in the system”, which are “a state’s primary insurance in a world without policeman”. To keep its power position, the U.S. should rely on retaining “command of the commons” – military control over sea, air, and space (Posen 2014, 135–163). Even Layne (1997, 87) in his pioneering work on offshore balancing, argued that one of the “two crucial objectives” of this strategy would be “enhancing America’s relative power in the international system”.

Also, neither of the critics puts into question its own adherence to liberal ideology. We have seen that they consider offshore balancing/restraint a better strategy than liberal hegemony for preserving the liberal values of U.S. society. Mearsheimer (2018, 11–12) is the most explicit when he argues that “within countries... liberalism is a genuine force of good” and that he considers himself “especially fortunate to have been born and lived all my (his) life in liberal America”. Yet he does not present a convincing solution to keep liberalism only for domestic use while eliminating it from foreign policy. On the contrary, he says that “when a liberal country finds itself in a position to pursue this ambitious policy, it will almost always do so” (Mearsheimer 2018, 120–121). The ultimate argument that offshore balancing is motivated by liberal ideology as much as liberal hegemony is lies in the answer to the question: why is it so important to the United States to prevent other powers’ regional hegemonies while retaining its own? Isn’t the belief that the U.S. could not be secure unless it was in charge of maintaining the Eurasian balance of power a product of the same “exceptionalism” the critics blame on the proponents of liberal hegemony as the basis of their support for the current U.S. grand strategy?

We may conclude that liberal hegemony is far more realist and offshore balancing/restraint far more liberal grand strategy than our four critics would admit. These two strategies are like two sides of the same coin – different visions of how the liberal United States could survive in an illiberal world, derived from different perceptions of U.S. position in world geopolitics and the international balance of power. Yet both can be justified by realist theories of international relations, either defensive or offensive. This is why there are realists who support the current U.S. grand strategy with no less fervour than liberals do. To them, a shift to offshore balancing/restraint would be a move against realism – as Brooks and Wohlforth (2016, 80) argue, “realism 101 would stress that in an uncertain world, prudential leaders should maintain power, not throw it away”. According to these two authors, proponents of “retrenchment” (their term for offshore balancing/restraint) overestimate the difference in the costs between deep engagement and their favourite strategy, for they still “invariably support the maintenance of a force projection capacity that is second to none” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, 123). Moreover, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016, 137) point to the contradiction in the critics’ application of the balance of power theory – they have not explained why other states’ incentives to balance against the U.S. would decrease if it retrenched, for it would still retain its material capabilities, which motivated balancing efforts in the first place. Thayer’s main realist argument against offshore balancing is that it would be a sign of weakness which could be exploited by its primary rival: “If the United States does not lead the world, another hegemon will rise to replace it. That hegemon will be China. China will then be in a position to dictate to the rest of the world, including the United States” (Layne and Thayer 2007, 117). The critics do not have appropriate answers to these issues.

CONCLUSION

Four realist critics of U.S. grand strategy of liberal hegemony who have published books on this matter – Layne, Posen, Walt, and Mearsheimer – present a critique which is flawed on two accounts. They do not properly define liberal hegemony, either by answering the question of what hegemony actually is, or in what sense it is liberal. They underestimate the actual realism of liberal hegemony, rooted in their own international relations theories. Consequently, they fail to deliver a clear-cut argument why the alternative grand strategy of offshore balancing/restraint would be more realist, less liberal, and better for the U.S. and the world. The flaws in the critique made it vulnerable to the arguments of both liberal and realist supporters of current U.S. foreign policy. In other words, by missing their own target, the critics made themselves an easy target for others.

My “critique of the critique” does not mean I support liberal hegemony, which I blame for most of the bad things the world went through during the post-Cold War period. On the contrary, by exposing flawed critique, I aim to make space for a better one. Nor do I think realism is bad, especially when it comes to neoclassical realism. I consider realist theories the best tool we have for understanding international phenomena, including U.S. foreign policy – of course, if they are correctly applied. Why do the four scholars fail to do this – the answer maybe lies in their position of the outsiders from the actual decision-making and implementation of U.S. foreign policy. They all criticize U.S. foreign policy elite from the outside and find the solution for transforming the grand strategy by creating an alternative elite which would someday get into a position to implement its ideas (Walt 2018, 284–291; Layne 2006a, 204–205; Posen 2014, 174–175; Mearsheimer 2018, 229–234). However, if we imagined them and their followers getting into a position to decide on U.S. foreign policy, how could we be sure they would really shift towards offshore balancing? Starting from a flawed critique on the outside, they could only be struck by reality once on the inside, discovering that liberal hegemony is “the only game in town”, or shifting to some form of “illiberal hegemony” such as Trump’s.¹⁶

A shift in the distribution of power in the international system – a relative decline of U.S. power – could push the United States away from liberal hegemony, yet it is not sufficient. A real ideological transformation of American society is needed, and it would certainly not happen if one group of liberal exceptionalists replaced the other. Here, even some of the moderate liberal arguments could be useful, such as those presented by David Hendrickson.¹⁷ He advocates an American return to the original liberal ideas of the Founding Fathers, which included a pluralist

¹⁶ Although I prefer the version in which Trump did not have a grand strategy at all (Trapara 2017b).

¹⁷ The necessity of combining liberalism and realism is also expressed by Fitzsimmons (2019).

concept of international relations based on Westphalian norms of national independence and non-intervention, as well as balanced power and great powers' concert as the model of world governance (Hendrickson sees the UN Security Council as an institutional framework of such concert) (Hendrickson 2018, 5, 74, 168–169, 193). However, as long as radical liberals like John Ikenberry and Joseph Nye dominate U.S. academic community and continue to believe in the liberal order as an ideologically superior model of world order compared to all possible alternatives, and thus propose only tactical defence on the outside while battling “populist” alternatives on the inside, one should be cautious about expecting a change anytime soon (Ikenberry 2020, 6, 307–311; Ikenberry 2018, 23; Nye 2019, 80). Until then, other states – especially those having “issues” with the United States – should embrace true realism in order to maximise their own national interests in a world still defined by the hegemonic foreign policy of the most powerful state.

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KRITIKA KRITIKE: ZAŠTO REALISTIČKI PROTIVNICI LIBERALNE HEGEMONIJE PROMAŠUJU METU?

Apstrakt: Unutar SAD vodi se intenzivna debata o tome da li one treba da nastave sa trenutnom velikom strategijom liberalne hegemonije, ili je zamene uzdržanijom spoljnom politikom. Među protivnicima liberalne hegemonije, izdvajaju se četiri poznata realistička teoretičara međunarodnih odnosa: Kristofer Lejn, Beri Pozen, Stiven Volt i Džon Miršajmer. No, njihova kritika ima dva nedostatka: ne definišu liberalnu hegemoniju pravilno; liberalna hegemonija je zapravo daleko realističkija strategija nego što tvrde. U ovom radu, autor kritikuje realističku kritiku u tri koraka. Prvo, pokazuje da kritičari ne odgovaraju na pitanje šta predstavlja hegemonija kao status države u međunarodnom sistemu i, posledično, jesu li SAD hegemon, ili žele to da postanu. Drugo, ukazuje na to da kritičari ne pružaju ubedljiv argument da se trenutna američka velika strategija odlikuje liberalizmom u svom sadržaju u meri u kojoj izvire iz njega. Treće, primenjuje teorije samih kritičara na slučaj spoljne politike SAD, kako bi pokazao da je liberalna hegemonija zapravo realistička velika strategija. Konačni cilj autora je da napravi prostor za bolju kritiku liberalne hegemonije, koja bi i dalje bila realistička, ali uz dodatak umerenih liberalnih argumenata.

Glavne reči: liberalna hegemonija; velika strategija; realizam; liberalizam; Sjedinjene Države.

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