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How Amoral Is Hegemon?•

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In the post-Cold War world, the last remaining superpower is almost hegemonic. Almost: but not quite. The US cannot act all on its own. It needs — or thinks it needs, or pretends to need — the support of at least a few other countries in anything it does. But it only needs a few, and there are many that could serve equally well.

That may not be true of all policy areas.¹ But some such thinking certainly underlies the US's "floating coalition" for its "war against terror."²

The US Department of Defense, echoing its President, says,

The war against terrorism is a broad-based effort that will take time. Every nation has different circumstances and will participate in different ways. This mission [against the Taliban] and future missions will require a series of coalitions ready to take on the challenges and assume the risks associated with such an operation.³

"Some countries may want to participate in one way, but not in another."⁴

Some countries will join the fight against one foe, others against other foes.

But "make no mistake about it: if they do not act, America will."⁵ No

particular ally is an indispensable element of any coalition. No other country

enjoys a veto against American action. "Our mission will not change to fit any coalition's."⁶

Such is the rhetoric. So too is the action. As the Washington Post reports,

Washington has established a floating coalition of allies, friends, useful strangers and the occasional opportunist to chase Osama bin Laden's network. But in waging war on Afghanistan, the Pentagon prefers an alliance of one, or at most one and a half.

The United States has gratefully accepted the help of police, intelligence and financial authorities around the globe to track al Qaeda's operatives, money and plots. Washington has also used the airspace, ports and bases of a few nations to get in position to attack.

But the strike force assaulting Afghanistan is essentially an all-American affair, with the important involvement of British commandos.

Paradoxically, after hectoring its European allies for years to get more interested in NATO operating outside Europe, Washington today is setting aside for the time being offers of direct military help from France, Germany, Italy, Spain and others.

The painful memories of command and control coordination problems in the Kosovo air war of 1999 and the Persian Gulf War of 1991 are still fresh. And the remote and fractured nature of the theater of operations in and around Afghanistan makes simpler a lot better.⁷

Evidence from experimental games should make us very wary of an Almost Hegemon of this sort. In the psychological laboratory, anyway, the dominant player in an "any of many" coalition game proves to be less solicitous of the interests of the junior partners in its coalition than is even an absolute dictator who needs none of them. If transferable to the real world, those findings seem to suggest that an Almost Hegemon is worst of all: even an Absolute Hegemon would treat others more fairly; and a Semi-Hegemon, with few junior partners to choose among, would be fairer yet again.

I.

An "any of many" coalition game is defined by twin features: (a) there is one dominant player who must be a member of any coalition; and (b) that dominant player can choose "any of many" of the remaining players as a coalition partner.

That characterization fits US national security policy the post-Cold War world. But it is a strategic structure we have seen many times before. Just think of the Marxian analysis of how capitalists manage to exploit workers.⁸ There is only one employer but there are many potential employees. The "reserve army of the unemployed" stands willing to take the jobs of any worker who demand higher wages; and that reduces the bargaining power of existing workers to near zero. Being in that "any of many" strategic position explains why capital hires labor, rather than labor hiring capital.

The solution, in the case of workers, lies in collective bargaining. The international analogue might be to require Hegemon to bargain with the rest of the world collectively, through for example the UN Security Council. It is hard to imagine what, in the foreseeable future, could possibly force the US Hegemon to that particular bargaining table.

In any case, collective bargaining is hard enough even for workers in a single firm, much less a whole industry. At least there, however, all potential workers have a common interest in collective action for full employment at fair wages.

Not so in alliance politics. The US's potential allies differ, often dramatically, in their interests and perspectives. The American Hegemon may need allies. But not many are needed; any will do; and it is usually not hard to find enough who, for one reason or another, are prepared to play along in return for minimal concessions.

II.

The fact that "any of many" situations seem like bargaining games — albeit of a radically degenerate form — makes matters worse in dealings with agents who are Almost Hegemons in that way. To see how, turn to some classic results from experimental games.⁹

A.

Consider first the case of an Absolute Hegemon, who does not have to cut a deal with anyone, and can do just as it pleases. This situation can be represented by what game theorists call the Dictator Game. The object of this laboratory game is to divide a pot of money (on the order of \$10 in these experiments) between two players. One player is designated to be the Dictator. The rules of the game are simple: the division is whatever the Dictator says, end of story. The other player gets no say in the matter at all (not even on a "take it or leave it" basis: that is how the Dictator Game differs from the Ultimatum Game, below).

The surprising thing — for economists, anyway — is that, when such games are played in psychology laboratories, absolute Dictators do not keep

everything for themselves. On average, across a wide range of experiments in diverse settings, Dictators ordinarily allocate around 20 percent of the pot to the other player, despite the fact that there is nothing in the strategic structure of the situation that would force them to do so.

Even absolute Dictators, it seems, have a residual sense of fairness that prevents them from running completely roughshod over other people who are utterly within their power.

B.

Turn now to the case of players who cannot act completely unilaterally, but instead require some minimal support from some other player or players.

That class of cases is represented by the Ultimatum Game.

In its standard form, the Ultimatum Game is played between two players. One is designated as the Proposer, the other as the Responder. The Proposer proposes a division of a pot of money between herself and the Responder, which the Responder can then either accept or reject. If the proposal is accepted, then both players get whatever was proposed; if the proposal is rejected, then neither player gets anything. The "take it or leave it" form of the proposal is the "ultimatum" that gives the game its name.

In that two-person version of the Ultimatum Game, Responders have power (if only the power to "say yea or nay") in a way that their counterparts in Dictator Games do not. Strictly speaking, of course, it is always in the Responder's interest in a one-shot game to accept any non-zero proposal.

Still, even in one-shot Ultimatum Games, Responders generally suffer a piqued sense of injustice, rejecting proposals giving them too little in consequence; and in anticipation of that rejection, Proposers tend to make larger offers in Ultimatum than in Dictator Games, in turn. Thus, in a one-shot two-person Ultimatum Game, the Proposer generally offers around 40 percent of the pot to Responders. That result, too, has been shown to be reliably robust across a wide range of experimental settings.

In this standard two-person Ultimatum Game, the Proposer might be dubbed a "Semi-Hegemon." The Proposer is hegemonic, to the extent that she gets to specify the terms of cooperation. But the Proposer in a two-person Ultimatum Game is only semi-hegemonic, in so far as she needs the assent of one specific Respondent for the deal to go through.

C.

For an analogue of an Almost Hegemon of the sort represented by the US in its war on terror, we need to examine what happens in an Ultimatum Game with multiple Responders, where "any one of many" potential Responders can take up the Proposer's offer.

The rules of a multiple-Responder Ultimatum Game are these. The Proposer proposes a division of the money between herself and any of the Responders. Each Responder can then either accept or reject the proposal. If no Responder accepts the proposal, then no one gets anything; if one Responder accepts the proposal, then the money is divided between that

Responder and the Proposer on the terms proposed, and all other Responders get nothing; if more than one Responder accepts the proposal simultaneously, then a random process determines which one of them will share the pot with the Proposer on the terms proposed, with the rest getting nothing.

The presence of multiple Responders changes the strategic structure dramatically. The multiplicity of Responders diminishes the power of each. A Responder can no longer ensure punishment for a stingy Proposer through her own rejection of an inadequate offer: some other Responder might accept the proposal, if she does not. The Proposer, in contrast, may still need some Responder or another to accept, but in a multiple-Responder Ultimatum Game she needs only "any one of many." While the power of Responders to punish stingy Proposers is divided and hence diminished, however, the sense of fairness that prevented dominant players in Dictator Games from exploiting their absolute power is not reinstated.

In a two-person Ultimatum Game where the Proposer has to cut a deal with one particular Responder, recall, the sole Responder is generally offered a moderately fair (40 percent) share of the pot. Far fewer research groups have explored Ultimatum Games with multiple Responders, and often with other ends in view. But the one team that has investigated how multiple Responders undermine incentives for fairness has produced findings which are striking. Where any one of five Responders can accept the offer, the Proposer in an Ultimatum Game drops her offer to around 10 percent of the

pot.¹⁰ And that, recall, is only half of what even absolute Dictators were prepared to offer to people utterly at their mercy.

III.

What is going on here? How could players who have to negotiate with one another (albeit on very unequal terms) be less inhibited in their pursuit of pure self-interest than are players who are capable of acting all on their own, without consulting anyone?

The answer, I believe, is that people really do internalize the principle that "with power comes responsibility." They only internalize that principle imperfectly — at a rate of something like 20 percent (on the evidence from Dictator Games where the Other is powerless even to "take it or leave it"). Nonetheless, where we have absolute power over others, we take some account of their interests, as a matter of moral principle. In those situations, we are subject to some "internalized moral discipline."

When others have power too, however, we tend assume that it is then up to them to look out for their own interests, and our own sense of responsibility for others evaporates. Principle gives way to prudence: internalized moral discipline gives way to the external discipline bargaining power. Where others are free to reject or accept our offer, as in the Ultimatum Game as opposed to Dictator Game, we assume that we are

morally at liberty just to bargain. We look out for our own interests, leaving others to look out for theirs.

In short, the appearance of having to "bargain with others" gives an Almost Hegemon the sense of having a bargaining-based license to ignore the interests of others, in a way that even an Absolute Hegemon would not. That, I surmise, is why players in "any of many" bargaining positions are only half as moral as absolute Dictators.

IV.

That is a psychologized account of the phenomenon, as observed among players of laboratory games. There is a special feature of international politics might if anything exacerbate that tendency among Absolute Hegemons, geopolitically.

For various reasons, some principled, others pragmatic, states seek legitimacy for their actions, in the eyes of audiences both domestic and international. In the case of an Absolute Hegemon acting all on its own, that desired legitimacy is best (perhaps only) secured through a policy of conspicuous self-restraint. In cases where one state must act in league with others (even just a few, select others, as in the case of an Almost Hegemon), legitimacy can arise also, or instead, from the consent of those other states.

In an "any of many" game played globally, therefore, the consent of allies, secured on the cheap, can replace self-restraint as a source of

legitimacy, thus exacerbating the tendency toward selfishness among Almost Hegemons that is observed in the psychology laboratory.

V.

The upshot of experimental games is thus to suggest that suffering under an Almost Hegemon is the worst of all worlds:

- An Absolute Hegemon would be fairer by a factor of two. It would be more self-disciplined, morally. An Absolute Hegemon would be more fair and accommodating of the views of others. It would do so as a matter of internalized moral principle, rather than as a matter of any power-political prudence.
- A Semi-Hegemon in a position to put ultimata to only one other potential partner whose cooperation is required would be fairer by a factor of four. A Semi-Hegemon would take the interests and perspective of the crucial Other into account nearly on a par with its own, as the realistic cost of the Other's cooperation, even in such asymmetrical situations as an Ultimatum Game. There, the discipline of external power substitutes, successfully, for internalized moral discipline.
- An Almost Hegemon who requires the cooperation only of "any of many" Others is largely free of both internalized moral constraints and external power-political constraints. An Almost Hegemon feels no obligation to internalize the moral self-discipline of the all-powerful

(which it is not, requiring as it does the cooperation of at least some Others). Yet Almost Hegemon's ability to choose "any of many" Others as its coalition partner greatly diminishes the extent to which those Others have any power to constrain it, as well.

VI.

Whether findings from laboratory experiments and hypothetical games translate into the real world is always an open question. Negotiators may not be rational, especially in crisis situations.¹¹ Findings about individual behavior may not translate reliably into predictions about the behavior of collectivities such as states.¹² And so on. Still, there is a long tradition of thinking about international relations in loosely game-theoretic ways of precisely this sort.

Among scholars of international relations, of course, methodological wars continue to rage.¹³ Whatever one's view of the success of the more highly technical "second-wave" rational-choice theorists of international relations, however, it seems common ground among all concerned that heuristically much has been gained from "first-wave" applications of "proto-game theory" using simple game-theoretic ideas more informally to motivate conjectures about the processes at work.¹⁴ Such low-tech applications of game theory have helpfully elucidated phenomena ranging from arms racing to fisheries negotiations.¹⁵

Notice, furthermore, that the findings discussed herein have been from games in experimental settings. That is the descriptive rather than prescriptive branch of decision theory: the branch that explores what people are psychologically prone to do, rather than what people ought to do according to axiomatized canons of hyperrationality. The results of experimental games are "reality tests" to which formalists must fit their models. Formal modellers eventually aspire to assimilate all such phenomena within their formalizations, of course, and eventually they might well succeed. My point here is merely that we need take no position within those larger methodological wars. Both parties to those disputes must take equally seriously findings such as are here reported from low-tech, experimental games.

The implications of those experiments are clear. There is nothing worse — nothing more bullheaded, selfish and tyrannical — than an Almost Hegemon. Looking around today's world, that is a conclusion that clearly resonates.

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Notes

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¹ Snidal 1985.

² Franks 2001.

³ US Department of Defense 2002; see similarly Bush 2001a,b.

⁴ Bush 2001a.

⁵ Bush 2002.

⁶ Bush 2001a.

⁷ Hoagland 2001.

⁸ Cohen 1983.

⁹ See, e.g.: Forsythe et al. 1994; Camerer and Thaler 1995; Hoffman, McCabe and Smith 1996; Camerer 1997; Henrich et al. 2001; Fehr and Fischbacher 2002; Camerer 2002, ch. 3.

¹⁰ Fehr and Fischbacher (2002, p. C9), summarizing Fischbacher, Fong; and Fehr (2001), describe how they experimented with "Ultimatum Games with one, two and five Responders. To allow for convergence and learning effects, in each experimental session a large group of subjects played the same game for 20 periods.... In every period the Proposers and Responders were randomly re-matched to ensure the one-shot nature of the interactions." In one-Responder games, Proposers quickly settled into a pattern of offering around 40 percent to Respondents. In two-Responder games, Proposers offered less from the start and, after learning how little they could get by offering, settled at around 20 percent toward the beginning of the second half of the experiment. In five-Responder games, "the share offered [by Proposers to Respondents] goes down even further ... [and] comes close to 10 percent in the second half of the session." Cf. Guth and Tietz 1990; Roth et al. 1991.

¹¹ Snyder 1978.

¹² Allison 1971.

¹³ Cf. Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1985; Achen et al. 1989; Walt 1999 and Bueno de Mesquita 1999.

¹⁴ Walt 1999, pp. 8-10.

¹⁵ Etzioni 1967; Underdal 1980.