ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies
July-September 2026 3(2)
https://shodhsamajik.com/

Original Article

RISING POWERS AND THE LIMITS OF US HEGEMONY: A NEOREALIST ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL AND STRATEGIC RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that rising powers can do challenge US hegemony not directly through direct military action but by institutional, economic strategies based in national interest. The post Cold War international system was described as unipolar but there was some space created for hegemonic resistance because of shifts in economic power, declining trust in western led economic institutions and increasing resistance to US agenda setting. Based on Neorealist thought, this essay examines why and how rising powers try to challenge the US hegemony by reducing dependency on US led institutions and creating alternatives. The argument is developed through two empirical case studies, the BRICS grouping as an example of institutional and financial challenge to the US and Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a case of direct resistance to US led security order. All together, these cases show that the US hegemony which is still significant is facing contest in practice.

Keywords: Us Hegemony, BRICS, Multipolarity, Russia, Ukraine, Neorealism

INTRODUCTION

"In the 1990, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was clear that the world we had known for half a century was disappearing. The question was what would succeed it. I suggested then that we had already entered the unipolar moment." Krauthammer (1990)

After the Cold War the United States has held a position of dominance in the international system. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed the only competitor of the US which left the US with unparalleled military and economic strength which played a central role in determining global institutions. The post 1991 period has be called as unipolar, marked by lack of any major constraints on the American dominance Wohlforth (1999). The dominance was stable for much of 1990s and 2000s, it was backed by economic globalization, the expansion of western led institutions and acceptance of liberal governance norms.

The US dominance has come under intense pressure over time. This has been because of rapid economic growth in non western states, particularly in Asia and the Global South, it has shifted the balance of power. Emerging countries now account for larger share of global output, trade and investment, yet they remain not important in key decision making institutions. The extensive use of sanctions, conditional lending and military interventions has led to discontent, and states raise questions about the fairness and legitimacy of US led governance. These highlights a growing divide between the relationships of global powers and the institutions established to maintain it.

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Received: 11 July 2026; **Accepted:** 09 August 2026; **Published:** 01 September 2026
DOI: 10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v3.i2.2026.146
Page Number: 74-79
Journal Title: ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies
Journal Abbreviation: ShodhSamajik J. Soc. Stud.
Online ISSN: 3049-2319, **Print ISSN:** 3108-2009
Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India
Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.
Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

This article argues that the rising powers can challenge the US hegemony. This challenge is not to replace the US as a global power but rising powers seek to limit US influence, reduce dependence on US led institutions and gain greater autonomy in their region tied closely to their national interests. Rising powers take this challenge through many ways such as institutional and economic strategies that constrains US dominance without affecting the global system. Institutionally they create and give strength to alternative institutions such as development banks, regional forums and financial institutions along side US led institutions to reduce US dominance. Economically rising powers diversify trade and finance in trying to reduce the US led sanctions and payment systems. They also challenge the legitimacy of US leadership by stressing the importance of sovereignty, non interference and multipolarity particularly in response to the double standards in the enforcement of international laws. In the security aspect resistance becomes intense when core national interests of the states are at stake which means that cooperating with US interests becomes optional. The US hegemonic interests no longer aligns with changing interests with rising powers and fails to reflect their growing economic and political power. Rising powers constrain political autonomy under US because they are selectively applied.

The world of states is seen as one without a higher authority to rely on because no one can guarantee their safety. States learn that survival depends mainly on their own autonomy and independent decision making authority. This is why independence and self help becomes a central practice. Power is not treated as something states need for prestige but as a practice tool to reduce fear and avoid threats. Since no state can ever be fully sure of another's intentions, material power becomes the safest guide for action.

When the international system is led by a hegemon, it affects and changes state behavior across the system. The dominant state gains a strong voice in setting rules, shaping institutions and influencing norms according to its own interests. This creates the condition for dependence for rising states. Relying on the hegemon for security or financial stability makes them vulnerable and loses bargaining power.

To explore this argument this essay examines unipolar character of the post cold war and identifies the conditions under which the US hegemony is getting challenged. It uses a Neorealist framework to explain why rising powers resist hegemonic power that limit autonomy and security. It presents two empirical studies, the BRICS grouping as an example of institutional and economic challenge and Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a case of direct resistance to the US hegemony. Finally the essay concludes by explaining on what these case studies reveal about the changing structure of global power and the future of US hegemony.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NEOREALISM

This essay uses a Neorealist framework to explain why rising powers challenge US hegemony. Neorealism focuses on state behavior in international system rather than in domestic politics or ideology and leadership preferences Waltz (1979). These structural constraints take place from two main features of international politics i.e. anarchy, unequal distribution of different capabilities such as resources like oil or rare minerals. These conditions shape motivation, limit choices and different behaviors of states.

In an anarchic system states cannot depend on external support and guarantees for their survival and therefore priorities security, autonomy and the practice of self help. Power is understood as a tool through which states manage uncertainty and liability. In a unipolar system when power is unequally distributed the dominant states gain an unequal influence over institutions, rules and norms. This concentration of power contains a structural constraint on weaker states as increased dependence that uncovers weaker states to intimidation even when the hegemon shows its leadership as rule based.

From this view, hegemony is innately unstable. The dominant power influences institutions and governance systems in ways that supports its national interests adding unbalanced advantages in the international order. Initially this arrangement may assist cooperation but they impose constraints as the dominant powers expand their capabilities. What starts as institutional participation slowly becomes structural dependence. As Waltz (1979) argues states will not accept arrangements that increases their insecurity and stop independent decision making regardless of short term benefits by hegemonic stability.

In this context the resistance to hegemonic power becomes stronger during periods of power shift. When changes in material power (such as increasing GDP) are not reflected in the existing institutions. As rising powers grow economically and politically it becomes harder to explain their continued inferior place within the international system. Layne (2011) argues that this imbalance is a main factor of hegemonic decline as rising powers seek to change their position into greater autonomy and influence in the international system.

Neorealism does not expect rising powers to respond to unipolar dominance through direct military conflict. Given the military superiority of the United States, such actions would be highly costly in terms of finances and resources and irrational in strategic way. Instead states pursue indirect forms of balancing that reduce insecurity while avoiding any hard power escalation. Pape (2005) sees this behavior as soft balancing in which states employ institutional coordination between rising powers as economic diversification and making diplomatic relations better to constrain a dominant power's freedom of action without using force. Stephen (2014) explains that such actions are very effective because they create exit options as well, it reduces dependency and increases bargaining power even when gaps in material power is persistent.

When a dominant power increases its influence into regions or issues that affects other states and their security, states are willing to resist openly. Mearsheimer (2019) argues that attempts to extend a hegemonic security order leads to backlash when they threaten core national interest of a state. In such cases, states can be willing to bear vital economic or political costs to protect their political autonomy.

Neorealism provides a clear explanation for why rising powers challenge US hegemony through institutional, economic and security measures. These responses are best understood as logical measures to structural inequality in the international system, rather than an attempt to completely change the current international order.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early studies mainly argue the strength of American dominance after the Cold War period was very stable and difficult to challenge in any serious way. Wohlforth (1999) argues that unipolarity reduced motivation for balancing as no state or coalition of state had the material capability to counter the United States. From this view, rising powers were expected accept the US dominance rather than oppose it.

Over time scholars began to doubt that till when this arrangement could last. The United States have clear military superiority and influence on global institutions. Layne (2011) argues that the US dominance depends on some specific historical conditions and economic decline encourages resistance from rising powers seeking greater autonomy and status. As material power is evenly acquired states find it difficult to accept a subordinate position.

Ikenberry (2011) argues that American power is integrated within liberal institutions that limit and strengthen US influence. He sees these institutions as stable and critics say that they mainly reflect Western priorities and have been slow to adapt to the changing power dynamics. Consequently, rising powers more and more view these institutions as instruments of control rather than neutral space for cooperation.

This view shifted the scholarly attention from traditional military balancing to institutional forms of resistance. Pape (2005) introduces the idea of soft balancing in which state use international institutions, economic coordination and diplomatic coalitions to limit a dominant power's freedom to act with any direct action. This approach is relevant for today's rising powers which have great economic influence but face high costs in directly challenging US military and economic capabilities.

Stephen (2014) shows how rising powers seek to reshape global governance by establishing alternative institutions that reduce reliance on western led systems. These efforts are not to overthrow the entire system but the weaken the US agenda setting power and giving the rising states better chance to practice their own autonomy.

Nye (2023) explains the role of soft power and legitimacy in maintaining leadership. AS US foreign policy relies very much on sanctions and military intervention, perceptions of double standards have reduced perceived legitimacy. Acharya (2014) suggests that the global order is becoming more plural as rising powers are promoting alternative norms based on multipolarity, non interference and respect for sovereignty.

Mearsheimer (2014) argues that actions to extend US security influence motivates resistance when they threaten the core interests of other major rising powers. These states may therefore oppose US preferences directly despite of consequences showing that hegemonic control has practical limits too.

Altogether, this literature review leads to a direct conclusion that while US hegemony remains significant, it is resisted through many ways such as institutional, economic and diplomatic measures. This scholarship provides strong theoretical support for the argument that the rising powers are challenging US hegemony in today's international system.

CASE STUDY: BRICS GROUPING AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE TO US HEGEMONY

The BRICS grouping i.e. Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa represents one of the most significant attempts made to challenge US hegemony through institutional and economic means. There are regional and political issues between these nations but they share a common goal i.e. reducing dependence on US dominated western structures of global governance.

The core feature of US hegemony is their financial power. The US dollar accounts for approximately 58 percent of global foreign exchange reserves and was used in 90 percent of international currency transactions International Monetary Fund. (2025) and Bank for International Settlements. (2022). This dominance allows the United States to influence rising states through sanctions, access to their capital markets and control over global payment systems.

BRICS acts on this unbalanced system through institutional innovation. The New Development Bank was established in 2014, it provides development finance without any extreme policy conditions, dissimilar with the IMF and the World Bank. By 2023, the NDB had approved over US $33 billion in loans mainly for infrastructure and sustainable development projects New Development Bank. (2023). NDB offers an alternative source of finance and reduces dependence on US led systems on finance. The strategic importance of such institutions depends less on its size but more in function. Stephen (2014) notes that alternative institutions increase bargaining power to the rising states by providing them exit options. States with different alternatives are less vulnerable to pressure and harsh conditions. This directly weakens the structural foundations of the US hegemony.

BRICS also challenges US hegemony by currency diversification. China and Russia have expanded bilateral trade using local currencies and while India introduced Rupee based financial settlement systems. These efforts are not aimed at replacing Dollar but at limiting influence of the US in global financial channels. Even limited diversification reduce the effect of sanctions and other methods of financial coercion.

BRICS also operates as a soft power platform, through summit diplomacy and coordinated positions on global governance reform, it positions itself as a voice for the Global South. By promoting sovereignty, non interference and development, BRICS challenges the legitimacy of authority of the US hegemony.

BRICS has expanded its influence by coordinated agenda setting at multilateral forums, regular summits allow the members to align on issues such as development financing, reforms on global governance and the role of international law. These statements are not binding but they carry a figurative act by showing collective resistance to the US dominance and therefore constraining the ability of US to shape unilateral global debates. The inclusion of new members such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates strengthens the economic and geopolitical relevance of the grouping. These states control major energy resources and have a regional influence which increases BRICS's capacity to operate as an alternative space for coordination.

By 2024, its members together accounted for approximately 31.5 percent of global GDP (PPP) exceeding the G7's share of around 30 percent International Monetary Fund. (2024). Intra BRICS trade now annually exceeds US $1 trillion annually reducing reliance on Western markets United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2023). Energy cooperation also plays a key role, for example, Russia and China have strengthened long term agreements partly in local currencies and the entry of Saudi Arabia signals non Dollar energy transactions. Farrell and Newman (2019) argue that control over economic network forms the basis of multilateralism, by creating alternative methods BRICS reduces US leverage while collectively increasing autonomy with direct confrontation.

Scholars say that BRICS is more about hedging than a formal alliance Acharya (2014). Its members work with the US and US led institutions but also build their own alternatives. This approach gives them more independence and makes them far less vulnerable without any direct conflict. According to Neorealism, states try to stay safe and powerful by having several options instead on depending just one dominant power.

CASE STUDY: RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE, RESISTANCE TO US LED SECURITY ORDER

Russian invasion of Ukraine shows a direct challenge to US hegemony, specially within the European security system. The invasion has been controversial and costly for Russia, it shows how rising or resurgent powers may resist US dominance when core national interests are seen to be threatened.

From Russia's perspective, NATO expansion created a long term security concern. Mearsheimer (2014)argues that the post Cold War order sidelined Russia by expanding Western military influence into regions that were seen as vital to Russian security. Diplomatic methods failed to manage these concerns strengthening the view that the US led order has prioritized Western interests over Russian interests.

The US relies heavily on sanctions and international isolation. By 2024 Russia was the most sanctioned country in the world with over 16,000 sanctions on Russian entities Luck (2025). Yet these measures failed to secure compliance by Russia.

After an initial decline in 2022, the Russian economy has been growing since 2023 mainly because of energy exports directed to non-Western markets World Bank. (2024). India and China increased import of Russian oil at discounted prices showing that US led sanctions were not universally enforceable.

This conflict also shows limits in the US led security order. Despite, providing over US $75 billion in military aid to Ukraine by mid-2024 Kiel Institute for the World Economy. (2025) the United States avoided direct military engagement with Russia. This restraint by the US shows the risks of a direct conflict with a nuclear armed nation explaining that US is restricted by escalation costs because of counter action.

The US led economic coercion is not universal, while Western countries froze over US $300 billion of Russian Foreign reserves European Council. (2023) Russia maintained a great financial stability by redirecting their trade flows. In 2023, over 80 percent of their crude oil exports went to Asia with India increasing imports to over 1.6 million barrels per day in 2023 International Monetary Fund. (2024). These trends show that how alternatives have reduced influence and pressure of the US.

Russia has also expanded the use of non US led financial infrastructure and systems. By late 2023 more than 70% of Russia China trade was completed in Rubles and Yuan instead of dollars Chabarovskaya (2025) reducing dependence to US controlled financial systems like SWIFT. These changes show how states protect autonomy under hegemonic pressure.

The conflict shows that for the United States its now harder to keep major countries aligned with its security position. NATO has stayed united but many countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East have chosen to remain neutral. In 2022, more than 40 nations did not support key UN votes condemning Russian invasion of Ukraine United Nations General Assembly. (2022). This does not mean they support Russia but they did not to take sides in an US led agenda. This weakens the moral and institutional authority of US leadership.

There is also a wider challenge to the hegemonic system, by strengthening energy, military and financial partnership with China, India, Iran and other non Western nations, Russia reduced its dependence on the US led Western system. Using non Dollar payments and alternative financial systems made US controlled networks less effective. As Cooley and Nexon (2020) note that a dominant power loses influence when it no longer controls the networks that support its powers.

This explains a key point that US hegemony relies on alignment rather than absolute command. When major states do not comply US loses its effectiveness. The Ukraine conflict also speeded systemic disintegration that promotes alternative trade routes, financial systems and diplomatic alignments.

Russia also challenged the US hegemony on the level of ideology by engaging in war as a stand against US dominance. This message did not convince most of the nations but it found support among states that are doubtful of US led Western military interventions and believe that international rules are applied unfairly. Russia's argument for these nations strengthened existing doubts about fairness and neutrality about the US led world order.

CONCLUSION

This article has explained that the rising powers are capable and has will to challenge the US hegemony not by replacing but by limiting its effectiveness and legitimacy. From a Neorealist perspective, these challenges are rational responses to the international systems that has been dominated by one hegemonic state since decades which make others dependent. As power shifts its becomes less beneficial for rising powers to depend on US led institutions.

The BRICS case shows that how rising powers use institutions and economic alternatives to challenge the US leadership. By creating their own development banks, using different currencies, BRICS countries reduce their dependence on US led financial systems. These efforts do not want to replace current institutions but to reduce the influential role of the US within them. Even on a minute scale such alternatives gives states more choice and bargaining power. In due time this weakens the basis of US hegemony.

Similarly the Ukrainian conflict shows the limits of the US powers when other countries do not fully align with it. Even with heavy sanctions and diplomatic pressure the United States was not able to get all the countries to follow its lead or change Russia's action. Russian action shows that US hegemonic influence is less effective in a divided world with support from non Western nations. This shows that the US leadership depends more on alignment than control and nations resist when the alignment weakens.

Looking at these cases together it shows that the international system is moving away from a world dominated completely by the United States. Power is becoming more multilateral and countries are negotiating and bargaining with the global institutions. This does not mean that the global system has been falling or that the US influence has disappeared. The United States still plays a leading role but rising powers are more and more pushing for more autonomy, influence and a better position in world order. As a result the world is becoming less top down and more and more challenged shaped by cooperation between multiple rising powers than by decisions by a single hegemonic power. This will lead to an adaptive world system that would respect the autonomy of even weak states and make the international system more inclusive, accepting the realities of a multipolar world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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