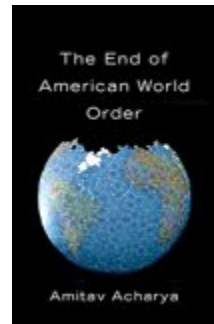


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Will the End of the “American World Order” Be Less Disruptive than We Think?

The End of the American World by Amitav Acharya is a punchy, trenchant critique of liberal internationalist and American hopes for a “sticky,” post-American liberal world order. At a lean 120 pages, the book can be read in a weekend—a blessing in itself—and it usefully crystallizes an emergent but rather disjointed critique of the U.S. liberal order floating around op-ed pages and universities outside the West. Unlike so many researching hegemony or unipolarity, Acharya does not believe the United States will bounce back from its troubles over the last decade, does not especially want that, either, and tries to sketch out alternatives to U.S.-led order. Ideas for a “post-American” world have been floating around for a while, of course, but much of that focuses on reconstruction—trying to prop up the U.S.-led system with a wider variety of stakeholders beyond just the West. This is captured, for example, in the (generally failed) effort by liberal international theory, and Western states generally, to make China and other G-20 states into “responsible stakeholders.”

Acharya will have none of that and so enunciates a little-heard rejection of standard liberal world order prescriptions. And he goes beyond that to try to sketch alternative futures, too—specifically, a global concert, or much thicker regionalism. Whether you agree that this would be a positive change or not, this whole effort is very valuable. As Acharya notes repeatedly in the book, Westerners, especially Americans, tend to assume that the alternatives to a U.S.-led world order are all much worse. Acharya calls this out as ethnocentric and

narrow—Americans reading other Americans and then pronouncing the strengths of an America-led order to the world (p. 130, n. 69; p. 138, n. 6)—and it is hard to disagree with him if we look at Western international relations (IR) graduate syllabi. His whole book reminds us in IR, and the Western foreign policy community in general, that we really do not know as much about the non-Western world as we should, particularly given that we often suggest non-Western states should do this or that, or should otherwise be happy living under American hegemony. IR is far too heavily based on modern and Western cases, and Acharya convincingly argues that this really limits our imagination for a post-American world order.[1]

The book itself has six bite-sized chapters. The book could easily be used for undergraduates. Between the introduction and conclusion, the four main chapters sketch the rise and fall of American post-Cold War hegemony; the pleasing, self-congratulatory American myths about liberal hegemony; the challenge of emerging states such as the BRICS or G-20 states to that order; and the possibility of regionalism, specifically more coherent regional international organizations (IOs), to replace an American globalism in decline.

The argument moves quickly and covers a lot of ground. Indeed, the book’s biggest weakness is probably just how much Acharya is trying to cram into such a short volume. Many of his statements will provoke or challenge, and frequently they build on previously con-

troversial arguments. In the end, there is such a cascade of contestable statements, one linked to another, that I imagine many IR readers will find themselves thinking, “Hey, wait! Flesh out point ABC before moving on to XYZ.” Serious readers will almost certainly wish the book were longer.

The most controversial claim, of course, comes right off the bat—that the United States is in a sustained, irreversible relative decline, that unipolarity is ending as we speak, and that a post-American order will be needed shortly. Acharya clearly sees himself charting that future, but many IR theorists, not to mention just about every DC think-tanker, will stop him right at the beginning to argue that the United States is not really in decline.

This is hardly the place to resolve that huge debate, but I agree that Acharya’s treatment of it is too blithe and short. He may indeed be correct—my own inclination is similar—but chapter 2, which covers this, is just twenty-one pages.[2] Acharya’s primary causal mechanism is unilateral overactivity. Unipolarity is not being undone by isolationist passivity or aggressive non-Western balancing. Acharya essentially applies Paul Kennedy’s notion of “imperial overstretch”: unipolar America, particularly under President George W. Bush, has blundered a lot and is overextended, provoking a lot of global resentment, damaging American soft power, and demonstrating that American hard power cannot actually change that much in tough places like the Middle East. Acharya seems to tilt toward Richard Haas’ notion of “nonpolarity”: the United States may indeed have a large economy and military, but these traditional power attributes are just not that efficacious anymore.[3] And when one looks at the U.S. fighting in Iraq today yet again, or the chaos that ensued from the “successful” Libyan operation, one can see his point.

But obviously many would disagree. The book would have benefited from a much sharper contest with writers like Joseph Nye, William Wohlforth, John Ikenberry, Robert Kagan, and the many others who see U.S. power as fairly enduring. One alternative interpretation is to argue, as Steve Walt often does on his blog (<http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/>), that American misadventures actually demonstrate how powerful the United States is. American campaigns in the Middle East are luxuries that no other state, not even China, could afford. Neoconservatives would likely argue that America is far more resilient than Acharya permits. The United States has been a great power since the 1880s and has bounced back from troubles repeatedly in the past. Liberals would retort that

Bush was only one president and that Barack Obama has sought to reverse American soft power erosion.

The next big controversial argument comes in the following chapter: that U.S. hegemony has not been nearly as benign and liberal as Americans like to think. This is almost certainly true. We can all think of bad U.S. behavior, from the mundane, such as not signing the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea while simultaneously insisting that China follow it, to the abhorrent, such as support for Mobutu Sese Seko or the incidents at Abu Ghraib. And it is also true that triumphalist American ideologues do not like to hear this.[4] But once again, the response from neoconservatives and liberal internationalists is not hard to telegraph: Yes, the United States has done awful stuff, but so have many other states, and all the challengers to the nation in its great-power history have been significantly more illiberal than America. Acharya would almost certainly agree that the world is a better place for the U.S. victories in World Wars I and II, the Cold War, and the war on terror. Similarly, with China in the future, I doubt that Acharya would prefer that China replace the United States, even in the Asian region. Liberal hegemony may indeed be very American, reward America disproportionately, and give rise to offensive American gloating and self-congratulation, but such choices in world politics are always relative. Almost all of Acharya’s critics would say the alternatives to U.S. power are much more unappealing.

Acharya’s response, in chapters 3 and 4, is to channel nonpolarity and argue that the alternative to the American world order is not a global hegemony of someone other than the Americans, but decentralization or perhaps multipolarity. In the place of the U.S. world order, Acharya sees coming either a global concert—which would not be just a great-power condominium, but would include middle income and poor states as well—or a decentralized (“multiplex”) world with organization coming organically from below in regional IOs.

Here again is big theoretical step guaranteed to provoke a heavy IR theory response. There is a lot of IR work suggesting that unipolarity makes the world safer, and that a global hegemon facilitates trade and growth.[5] Acharya is aware of theories like hegemonic stability and he does not convincingly refute them. He is perhaps too anxious to unseat the American dominance to see how hard bottom-up, organic cooperation among middle income states is likely to be. He does not contend with the basic game theoretic insight, for example, that more players make coordination harder to achieve. He does not ad-

dress the well-known problems of collective action. He says nothing of free-riding or buck-passing. Theories of hegemony and unipolarity posit that one state can carry these costs and help push fractious, self-seeking players toward consensus. I am extremely doubtful a global concert or regional organizations could achieve consensus; they certainly do not do so today. It is hard to imagine global free trade, which has done so much to alleviate global poverty, surviving the regionalism Acharya foresees.

Acharya speaks hopefully of “open regionalism” and “inter-regionalism,” but these are weak conceptual and operational reeds. Inter-regional organizations are few, meet rarely, and are talk-shops. And the theoretical work on inter-regionalism is heavily normative. Open regionalism is something of paradox. For regions to become genuine order-bringing agents, they will eventually need rules and boundaries. Otherwise they are just talk-shops. Indeed, one can see this in Asia, which has a surfeit of IOs, but they are all shallow. Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, ASEAN+3, the East Asian Community, and so on may indeed bring together elites to talk and pose for the “family photo,” and that is better than nothing. But are these talk-shops really ready promote deep cooperation that generates real costs and benefits? Indeed, I think Acharya is missing a major point of most non-Western IOs: they are not intended to provide rules, open markets to trade, facilitate tourism, and so on. They are firstly sovereignty-reinforcement platforms for post-colonial, frequently nondemocratic, elites. Sovereignty requires social recognition, so standing on a platform with other leaders and states, reinforces one’s own state-ness.[6]

Despite its many contestable propositions, Acharya’s book is easy to recommend. The volume of work in IR, both empirical and normative, supporting the perpetuation of American global dominance is overwhelming. That Acharya has written this book at all is useful in that context. He picks up and channels a non-Western critique that is out there, but few of us see due to our Anglo-American hermeneutic circle. This critique will pick up steam in the coming decades, as American relative decline continues. Within a decade, China’s gross domestic product will exceed America’s, and the United States will increasingly need to find a way to live with wealthy, capable, nationalist states from the former third world.

American power is unlikely to crack up; the United States is not Rome in the fifth century, or the Ming suddenly facing the Manchus. China’s future growth is unlikely to be as robust as it has been; demographic, environmental, and political constraints will tighten. India is decades behind. The G-20 and BRICS have not shown great solidarity. But the long-term trends nonetheless favor Acharya’s analysis. As more and more states become wealthier, stable, and more capable, America’s room to move will contract, and the pressure to change global rules will only rise. Acharya is probably wrong today about the end of the America world order, but time is on his side.

Notes

[1]. Robert Kelly, “Defining IR: Is it Asia’s Turn?,” *International Relations and Security Network*, *Swiss Federal Institute of Technology*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Special-Feature/Detail?~lng=en&id=150816&tabid=1453260368&contextid774=150816&contextid775=150815>.

[2]. Robert Kelly, “Is There an Obama Doctrine?,” *The Diplomat*, September 22, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/is-there-an-obama-doctrine/>.

[3]. Richard Haas, “The Age of Nonpolarity,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63397/richard-n-haass/the-age-of-nonpolarity>.

[4]. Robert Kelly, “Agree with Heinlein’s ‘Citizens vs Civilians’? Then this US Military History is for You,” *Duck of Minerva*, June 24, 2013, <http://www.whiteoliphant.com/duckofminerva/2013/06/agree-with-heinleins-citizens-vs-civilians-then-this-us-military-history-is-for-you-book-review.html>.

[5]. Ethan Kapstein, ed., *Unipolar Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[6]. I make this argument at length in Robert Kelly, “Security Theory in the ‘New Regionalism,’” *International Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2007): 197-229.

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