

## **Sovereignty and Hegemony**

Ukraine and Kazakhstan after 1991

09 Maggio 2020

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the way hegemony influences sovereignty, considering the following hypothesis: 1) states do not consider hegemony a violation of their sovereignty; 2) states usually desire to be within the sphere of influence determined by a hegemon, due to ideological, political, economic, cultural and historical similarities.

Sovereignty implies a certain behaviour in international state affairs, and is a characteristic of the state, used frequently to describe the “right to rule”, especially after Westphalia peace treaty. Hegemony is established within the system of states framework and is determined by their interactions and their capabilities. From this standpoint, hegemony determines the type of interactions between states and implies some changes in their course of action. These changes may be accepted voluntarily or may be imposed, forced upon the featured state. The result of these alterations is that sovereignty is being shaped in order to match the wishes of the hegemonic state. Based on a realist approach, this paper intends to contribute to the understanding of states’ behaviour during the interactions with hegemonic states, revealing any changes that may occur in this relation. The analysis will be conducted by comparing the behaviour of Ukraine and Kazakhstan, after the dissolution of Soviet Union, both being influenced by the actions of the Russian Federation, a state that is looking for its imperial hegemonic brightness.

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### **1. Introduction**

The evolution of the system has often been characterized by a recursive highlight on states that have imposed their own rules within the system and have led to the creation of interaction models for other states, in order to achieve their own interests. After 1991, the Russian Federation defined itself as a state and centred its role as a hegemon not only on military issues, but also on the manifestation of power through the exercise of influence. An important issue for the newly established Russian state was to maintain itself as a power pole within the sub-system constituted by the former Soviet republics. By means of military, economic, political, institutional and ideological actions, the Russian Federation managed to create and preserve an area of interest, regardless of the changes in power within the system. This fact drew worldwide attention to the increase of Russian influence and the materialization of the behaviour of hegemonic expansion.

China's rise on the international stage determined the growth of its economic projects in the Caucasus and Central and Eastern Europe, which, in practice, can be considered a hegemonic early expansion of the old hegemon. The Silk Road project is about to connect a series of land and sea routes from China and Europe, passing through several states. All these countries will gradually be subjected both to increasing Chinese influence and the impact of competition between major powers (the old hegemony and others).

## **2. The presentation of hegemony from the hegemon standpoint**

Hegemony is usually presented in academic literature from the hegemon standpoint, focusing on how his acts determine the behaviour of other actors.

J.J. Mearsheimer states that the goal of states is survival, and this goal is achieved through offensive military capabilities, hegemony being the best guarantee for survival [1].

Within the theory developed by K. Waltz, structure determines the distribution of capacities, leading to the formation of bipolar, multipolar and unipolar systems, and determines the behaviour of similar units [2]. In this case, hegemony can be found in the capacity distribution phase, the author adopting the hegemon perspective, which can act on "units" in a bipolar, multipolar or unipolar system.

G. Modelski presents the international system as a cyclic succession of 'global war' and 'global peace'. The first phrase – 'global war' describes the situation where a 'challenger' state rises within the international system and has the possibility to change the existing order through the war. The second cycle – 'global peace' defines that process of maintaining the existing order by balancing the existing threat [3]. In the first phase, we can discuss the hegemon as being the 'challenger', an approach based once again on the larger power perspective, the dominating actor who has the capacity to make significant changes within the international system. Regarding the second, the balancing process, the perspective is the same; the higher power determines the existence of a threat in relation to other minor powers, eventually leading to the formation of a coalition.

The association between the term *hegemon* and the proliferation of a threat among inferior powers is also present in Stephen Walt's study, '*Origin of Alliances*', where he theorizes the so called "balance of threats". According to him, in their quest for establishing favourable *status quo* states don't just balance the power of other actors in response; they also opt for balancing when they feel threatened. More accurately, a central feature of the hegemon is its ability to threaten other actors, an action which results in a balancing behaviour destined to obtain security. Typically, strong states choose to balance the threatening state/states, while weaker players prefer the alignment reaction (there is also an exception to this latter case: in the case of a weaker opponent, the possibility of balancing increases significantly over the alignment scenario) [4]. In this respect, when analysing the behaviour of the actors, it is important to consider that this variable is strongly determined by the hegemon's action.

In addition to power, R. Gilpin identifies other central features of hegemony, such as 'prestige – a set of rights and rules that govern inter-state interaction'. Within the theory of international political change, put forward by the author, the international system is viewed as a four instances cycle (system equilibrium, power redistribution within the system, system imbalance, crisis settlement/resolution [5]). From Gilpin's perspective, the hegemon determines the characteristics of the international system and its actors; thus, it determines the state of equilibrium (when it has no desire to inflict changes to the *status quo*), the redistribution of power (it applies when the hegemon pursues an increase in power) or the war that leads to systemic change. The theory of political change in the international system analyses exclusively the behaviour of the hegemony or the ascending states that pursue hegemon status.

Considering several variables (industrialization, technology, living standards, economic efficiency), the hegemonic stability theory developed by A.F.K. Organski also presents a hegemon centred perspective in the international system. The Power Transition Theory consists of 3 stages (potential power, incrementing power, maturity/stable power) and is based on the concept of *power* as defined by Organski: "the ability of a state to influence the behaviour of other actors on the international scene in accordance with own interests" [6]. The transition of power discusses several aspects of national power, and how they can influence the actor's actions at a systemic level, in terms of power distribution.

I. Wallerstein presents the international system comprised of centre, semi-periphery and the periphery. **Domination within the system is achieved either by developing a world empire or by gaining *hegemony* – defined as the ability of a certain power to impose its own rules on the system by achieving agricultural, industrial, commercial, financial domination** [7].

The approach on hegemony from the perspective of the hegemon is also found in the hegemonic stability theory developed by Robert Keohane. In this case, the hegemon has a significant control over resources, domination that leads to territorial expansion, imperialism and the expansion of influence. These potential outcomes ultimately imply the development of a new type of order, achieved through cooperation/negotiation, by mutual agreement or enforcement.

Considering all the above approaches (hegemony seen from the hegemon standpoint) the following conclusions can be drawn: 1) the hegemon imposes a certain type of order within the international system in accordance with its own interests; 2) the hegemon influences or determines the behaviour of state actors in its sphere of influence. Changes in the hegemon status or mutations in its sphere of influence take place through war or peace; depending on a costs/benefits ratio (the action that generates greater benefits is preferred). The effects of hegemonic actions on actors may be in accordance the latter's interests (*benign hegemony* – the concept was introduced by J.J. Mearsheimer [1]) or may be totally opposite (*malign hegemony*). In all referenced literature, the approach on hegemony is unidirectional (centred on the hegemon and its influence on weaker actors), aiming to analyse the distribution of power at a given moment in the international system, to explain how a hegemon managed to obtain this status or its relations with other state actors seeking to obtain this status. Thus, analysing the definitions of hegemony, one might conclude that this status characterizes the situation that occurs when a state makes use of its capabilities to impose its own interests, in a coercive or peaceful manner, towards other states part of the same system or subsystem.

Coercion covers both the use of military capabilities and the enforcement of restrictions or sanctions destined to affect the interests of the target state. Forcing the hegemon's agenda on a peaceful basis is achieved through negotiations between the hegemon and the targeted actor, the latter acknowledging the hegemon's superiority while trying to attain maximum outcome by capitalizing on its own strengths.

During this study on the behaviour of states that gravitate in the influence zone of a hegemon, I'm aiming to start an academic discussion on a second hypothesis – resizing sovereignty under hegemonic conditions. In support of this hypothesis, I will address the cases of Ukraine and Kazakhstan within the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation, between 1991 and 2015, taking into account certain variables (political regime, elites, military bases, religion, general hegemony perception). The comparative study aims at highlighting and analysing common elements of the hegemonic action in order to propose a different definition of hegemony (from the perspective of state actors existing in the sphere of influence of a hegemon). Finally, the definition should be suitable for a comparison with the existing definitions in the field, from the perspective of the hegemon. The purpose of this approach is to highlight the common elements and the differences between the two perspectives, aiming to revise existing approaches on *hegemony*.

### **3. Behaving in Russia's sphere of influence – the case of Ukraine and Kazakhstan**

According to Robert Gilpin's hegemonic stability theory, the international system needs a hegemon to guarantee a certain order. For a state to preserve its hegemony it is not mandatory to resort to force, an alternate course of action is usually consisting of a sustained export of its welfare (*security, technology, money, ideological system and values*) to the states in its influence area, thus creating a state of contentment, avoiding an expensive violent solution.

Generally, the spread of these hegemony capacities/models is carried out from the centre to the periphery. The actions taken by Russia in the former ex-Soviet states fall well within the typology of Gilpin's hegemon. Thus, Moscow's behaviour is that of a competitive, hegemonic actor who exudes influence in such a form factor that can easily be absorbed by targeted states. In its relation to Ukraine, Russia mainly had an economic, industrial and military influence. By 2014, Russia was the largest selling market for Ukrainian products. In the same time period, most of the technologies used in the civilian or military industrial sector came from the Russian Federation. On top of these facts, even the structure of state administration and armed forces, along with their inner working procedures, were of Russian inspiration, created to easily fit with Moscow's similar entities. Following the Russian aggression in 2014, Ukraine has decided to reform its military system in a comprehensive manner, aiming to make it more efficient and compatible with Western European standards (*NATO, EU*).

While the Ukrainian government was busy acting to reduce Russian influence on its defence industry, China, an actor pursuing an increasing influence in Eastern Europe, openly expressed its interest in covering this vacuum.

In the case of Kazakhstan, Russian influence is mainly expressed in ideological and political terms. Kazakhstan is a presidential republic with strong authoritarian accents: the first and only elected president is Nursultan Nazarbayev, a single party (opposition parties exist only formally, they have no real chances to reach power), restricted access to media outlets, rigged elections. Even if from a political and ideological point of view Kazakhstan remains in the zone of influence of the Russian Federation, from an economic standpoint, considering its natural resources, it has a competitor status (unlike Ukraine that suffers in this sector).

Through its large-scale economic projects, China is pursuing a hegemonic expansion in Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe. The Silk Road project aims at rebuilding China's link with Europe by investing in road, rail and maritime transport routes. Interestingly one of these envisaged routes aims at creating a sea-link between China – Kazakhstan (Aktau port) – Azerbaijan (Alat port) – Georgia (Batumi port) – Ukraine (the Illicivsk port). We notice the fact that former Soviet soil is nowadays subject to a clear overlapping of spheres of influence, giving actors the opportunity to alternate their behaviour according to their security needs, in the sense of hegemonic balancing/alignment.

The state of Kazakhstan faces an interesting and challenging position, being a part of Russia's sphere of ideological/political influence and of China's economic realm, at the same time. Even though Kazakhstan was, until recently, a part of Russia's sphere of influence, at present time it accepts China's hegemonic expansion in order to obtain as many behavioural alternatives as possible in relation with the international system. Thus, Kazakhstan is aiming to avoid an exclusive hegemony, preferring this duplicitous status. However, this behaviour may have different outcomes depending on various factors, among which the capabilities of the state and its internal political resources will play a central role. The state's economic, natural resources and exploitation capabilities are also important, potentially serving as a prerequisite for independent behaviour from Russian influence. On the other hand there are certain internal elements suggesting that this course of action will not be adopted in the medium or short term: 1) The persistence of an authoritarian government system (for Russia it matters less who is in power as long as the general orientation remains in its favour); 2) An important amount of Russian-speaking population (Russian language is used as frequently as the Kazakh native language); 3) The rights to use strategic points/military bases willingly granted to the hegemon (until 2050 Russia administers the city of Baikonur, where it operates the world's largest cosmodrome).

From the point of view of the hegemon, the internal characteristics of Ukraine, namely the role of elites and ruling parties, were frequently used in maintaining a hegemony-friendly orientation. In a similar manner with Kazakhstan, Ukraine hosts an important Russian-speaking population that could be used by the hegemon in order to achieve immediate operational goals. In the case of Ukraine, the hegemon's sphere of influence also had a military dimension, again by granting rights to strategic points/military bases. Russia leased the military base from Sevastopol, where the old Black Sea Fleet was first established, after the breakup of the USSR. From an economic point of view, Russia and the ex-Soviet states formed a closely connected market determining a deep crisis after the start of the Donbas conflict, in 2014. The economic downfall was augmented by the fact that Donbas hosted many of the country's strategic industrial facilities.

**The interference of some other actors (USA, western states – France, Germany) within the hegemonic influence zones (Russian Federation in this case) firstly generated a decrease in influence and determined the hegemon to adopt of a reactive behaviour. Afterwards Ukraine's option for the European construct (EU) based on democratic, non-hegemonic, values led to an aggressive behaviour: the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and other territorial claims, by supporting pro-Russian separatists in the self-proclaimed Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.**

Thus, the hegemon assessed EU actions as an attempt to reconfigure the existing spheres of influence, to which it reacted by changing its policies in order to restore the balance in the system (the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula was actually an act of transforming symbolic/debatable influence on concrete administrative control). The reactive behaviour of the hegemon is in this case determined by its perception over external challengers (powers) that attempt to threaten his position. Thus, taking as reference this aggressive course of action, preferred by the hegemon in Ukraine, we could envision the extreme case where this scenario might repeat itself in Kazakhstan's southern area – Mangista province – a rich area with natural resources (oil, gas, uranium) where the Aktau port, included by China in the Silk Road project. On behalf of the hegemon (Russia), this course of action might be, once again, perceived as a restoration of balance in the system in relation to the challenger (China in this case). Even if one may assume the two situations (Ukraine and Kazakhstan) are very similar,

there are a few differences that may lead to different outcomes: in Ukraine the influence of the EU implied a change of the political and ideological system (active removal of the pro-Russian orientation), which is not the case for Kazakhstan-China's political system cannot be easily adopted, if at all (mainly because its unique civilizational features and its economics oriented approach). However, a serious subordination of the political and ideological system to the economic interests of China might be reached, at which point the challenged hegemon (Russia) might consider itself entitled to intervene for the restoration of its areas of influence.

The second hypothesis of this research tackles the resizing of state sovereignty of an actor embedded to the sphere of influence of a hegemon. In order to illustrate this phenomenon, the study will consider the following premises: **1)** the reference actor is the state; **2)** the international system is anarchic; **3)** the level of analysis is the state level.

#### **4. Sovereignty under hegemony conditions**

Sovereignty has been defined in the literature in different ways, depending on the variables taken into discussion. In his attempt to illustrate that sovereignty is an international institution, K.J. Holsti defines this concept as “a set of practices, ideas, beliefs and norms” [8], both within the state and in the interstate relations. Sovereignty is an essential element for actors – it supports the formation of states, maintaining their integrity in case of internal or external threats, and it contributes to the state preservation, preventing its disappearance [8, p. 113].

Stephen D. Krasner identifies several types of sovereignty: legislative/legal sovereignty, westphalic sovereignty, local sovereignty and interdependent sovereignty. Legislative/legal sovereignty refers to the mutual recognition of territories or territorial entities that have legal independence. Westphalian sovereignty defines a political structure based on the exclusion of external interference from the domestic administrative structures established on a certain territory. The third form of sovereignty refers to the state control existing over a certain territory well determined by borders, and the fourth is the state's ability to regulate information flows, products, ideas, and population movement crossing its borders [9].

**Sovereignty mainly characterizes a form of state organization, which is determined by its constituent elements – it involves a bounded territory, bounded by the other actors, legitimacy in internal and external actions, authority and recognition by other actors. Sovereignty refers to the rejection of foreign interference in the internal affairs of a state.**

Hegemony implies a dominating state that imposes its interests in a peaceful or coercive manner to actors in its sphere of influence. At a first glance, sovereignty and hegemony cannot coexist, mainly because the manifestation of hegemony unequivocally leads to interference in the internal affairs of the state actors belonging to a sphere of influence – in order to determine them to accept the interests of the hegemon. However, there may be some situations in which the two co-exist: when the state actor manages to resize his sovereignty efficiently, to meet the requirements of the hegemon. Reconfiguring sovereignty involves legitimate decision-making and is the attribute of domestic authorities of a state. This type of policy making is in compliance with international norms governing the relations with other actors, even if the policy itself favours the hegemon and its interests. This resizing process can be: **1)** the outcome of a negotiation process between the actor and the hegemon (this being the least invasive scenario); **2)** the interest of corrupt political elites, legitimately put in place as policy (in order to obtain personal benefits, ruling individuals make decisions that lead to a resizing of sovereignty); **3)** the will of the people, legitimately expressed, especially following the breakup of multinational entities (empires, multinational states) – a will that signals the wish for preferential relations with the successor of a former empire/multinational state, mainly determined by common cultural values.

Stephen D. Krasner points out that strong actors can, in some cases, conquer the weak, without changing the principles of international or westfalian sovereignty. According to him, in this scenario, the act of conquering represents a simple change in borders, with no influence on sovereignty. But when leaders choose to reconfigure internal authority structures, leaving them without autonomy, this goes against the concept of Westphalian sovereignty. Krasner provides the example of the colonial era, when the great powers diminished the internal authority of the structures by appointing leaders loyal to their interests, behaviour known as pre-western order [9, p. 6]. This example of conduct can also be applied after the collapse of the USSR, in Russia's relationship with the ex-Soviet republics. Radu-Sebastian Ungureanu called this instance *power oriented post-imperial order* and defined it as the imperial power's intention to preserve its influence on its former territories [10]. Analysing mainstream theories of international relations, one might conclude that the hegemon imposes a certain type of order called hegemonic order. This situation changes when a new challenger emerges within the system and peacefully or by means of a war is aiming to replace the old hegemon, in order to impose its own hegemonic order.

**The violation of westfalic sovereignty is thought to be the most common form of sovereignty infringement, situation that assigns a decisive role to leaders and decision-makers within a state** [9, p. 7]. The ir role is important in maintaining sovereignty, especially when there is external pressure or interference fr om a foreign actor. Leaders have the ability to decide whether or not to recognize entities without territoria l or legal independence; they may intervene in the internal affairs of another state or compromise the autono my of their own policy [9, p. 7]. Such decisions are usually taken by leaders in order to maintain power or d efend the security, prosperity and values of those people who support them in this position.

The way this happens can vary from one state to another, each choosing to prioritize certain segments (mili tary, human rights, nationalism) according to the support they receive [9, p. 7].

Westfalic sovereignty can be easily violated with a strong input from the country’s leadership, direct inte rvention or invitation. Intervention means that stronger states intrude in weaker states and through coercion impose certain rules or institutions. The violation of sovereignty by invitation refers to leaders’ deliberate ac tion to voluntarily adopt certain policies that lead to a limitation in authority – for example, loans from inter national organizations are usually granted only when specified requirements are fulfilled and certain domestic policies are implemented [9, p. 8].

## **5. Sovereignty and hegemony**

From an internal affairs standpoint, sovereignty defines the supreme state authority at a certain moment in ti me, within a well-defined territory, that consists the main source of legality, transcending the policy of a lea der or a group [8, p. 113] (political parties – government). Thus, everything that happens in its territory, tie d to sovereignty, comes under its jurisdiction. Sovereignty is an essential element of statehood, as it c ontributes to the creation of legitimate, independent actors, who are capable to decide for themselves on inte rnal and external issues [8, pp. 113-114]. Analysing these elements, we find that sovereignty is defined by t he following concepts: **authority, legitimacy, recognition, statehood and territoriality.**

**Under hegemony, these characteristics are modified to meet the r equirements or needs of the hegemon, and the changes are legiti mately achieved either by direct hegemony or by the will of small and medium-sized states who want to obtain certain gains r elative to the hegemon.**

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