
Montserrat Pintado
PhD in International Studies
University of the Basque Country, Spain

The rise of new poles of power and the changing character of United States’ hegemony has revealed that many of the theoretical lenses to analyze the phenomena have serious explanatory problems. Concretely, the material rise of China and its growing social power, along with the diffusion of power and hegemon’s interventionism, showed that hegemony was something more than a material concept.

These events have shaken international society as well as IR theory, to the extent that some scholars have pushed for a revolution on several established concepts, proposing approaches that diverge from the “isms”. Scholars ascribed to social paradigms such as constructivism and English School have made attempts that worth attention. These developments explore the links between concepts like hegemony, legitimacy and identity. These constructivist-English School new frameworks reveal themselves as capable efforts for explaining the causes and consequences of the current unipolar order, as well as new challenging events involving China’s rise. Therefore, the present proposal aims to explore the redefinition of the concept of hegemony by examining the legitimacy practices that took place in international society.

1. Introduction

In the discipline of International Relations, there coexist a wide range of lenses to conceptualize and analyze the international real. Needless to say, some of these visions are considered rivals or even antagonistic. However, as history has shown, the different lenses to analyze international politics have usually failed to prevent major events like the dissolution of the Soviet Union or the economic crisis. In the case of the emergence of unipolarity, several leading scholars took years to admit that the system was, at the end, unipolar (Krauthammer, 1990/1991; Waltz, 2000). As long as unipolarity and hegemony constitute one of the most troublesome and discussed concepts of the discipline, this paper considers it to be the perfect ground to develop a bridge building approach to international affairs.
As Sil and Katzenstein suggest, eclectic approaches stimulate the transgression of theoretical boundaries both in the research questions and in the perspectives of the discipline (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010: 21). This way, it will be possible to identify logics drawn in different paradigms and bear with the complexity of some phenomena as the changing power dynamics.

Often build on opposition to other theories, paradigms usually highlight several faces of the phenomenon while obscuring others. Moreover, IR as a discipline often bears with several events that do not necessarily fit into the expectations of theories. Taking that into account, it is possible to argue that an eclectic framework has more chances to minimize these anomalies by opening the analytical scope. As a starting point, it is necessary to address the nature of the international environment, both as an arena with the absence of a global authority, but also characterized by several institutions, rules or patterns in the international arena that, in fact, constitute an international society.

The notion that admits the existence of international society inevitably leads to a convergence between two distinct theoretical traditions, English School and constructivism. This society is, in fact, constructed on and shaped by ideas, values, identities and norms that are, at some degree, common to all the members of the society (Bellamy, 2005: 2). The most influential theories of the discipline have, in practice, ignored this claim and built its theories on the premise of the anarchical nature of the system and the material nature of the power structure.

The starting point of the resurgence of the conceptualization of hegemony and the hierarchy of international society was the end of the Cold War. Even though some decided to define it as “a unipolar moment” or “the unipolar illusion”, the events that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks reinforced the discourses around the definition of the actual international society as unipolar or hegemonical. In this case, theories were unable to anticipate the change of the Cold War hierarchy, and also were hardly resilient to address this new reality.

This paper argues that, up to some point, the difficulties of IRT to forecast and adapt to the changes on the hierarchies of the international society is extremely linked to a partial definition of the constituent sources and components of the international order. In other words, the broad definition of the constituents of hegemony overshadows other characteristics that explain more efficiently the strategies of the hegemon, the changes of the system and the eventual rise of a challenger. In the first part, this paper will address the major theoretical approaches towards hegemony, navigating between materialist and social approaches. The second part will compose a redefinition of the concept of hegemony, as well as suggest a methodological proposal to analyze practically hegemony and hegemonic successions. In the third part, an empirical analysis will be developed. Finally, the last section will offer several conclusions.

2. Hegemony in International Relations Theory. The gap between materialism and social visions

1 The end of the Cold War and the advent of unipolarity, for example, caught several scholars by surprise. As a result, some delayed for years the proclamation of unipolarity. Examples include prominent scholars such as Waltz (1993), Kaplan (2000) or, to some point, Krauthammer (1991/1992).
The argument developed in the present paper aims to discuss the argument of those theories that adopt a purely materialist vision of the structure of the system. In the case of IRT, realist approaches\textsuperscript{2} have been the most prominent defenders of materialism. For a majority of realists, hegemony is linked to the concentration of power resources on the hands of a single state, to the extent that this concentration gives it an extraordinary advantage among its competitors (Layne, 2006). Hegemonic theorists within realism relax the considerations of the importance of anarchy and emphasize the hierarchical management of the international society. Under these lenses, the hegemon is the base of a stable order. However, this stability is directly linked to the material resources it possesses. Hegemony, for realist, is a leadership of one state over others, prioritizing several political, economic and territorial notions that favor its interest, mainly those regarding economics and security. The hegemon provides several public goods such as security, the freedom of trade, and the stability of the economy. This way, it legitimizes its exercise of power and prevents the dissent from inside its order. (Gilpin, 1981)

The materialist approach’s principal works portray hegemony as a result of the accumulations of high amounts of material power. Even if this approach has been usually attached to the realist tradition in its broader sense, it is undeniable that the material analysis has commonly been used as a ground to develop other theories, such as neoliberalism. As Ikenberry put it, polarity and power distributions only offer a description of national capabilities but cannot explain the political formation that the hegemon builds around these material assets (Ikenberry, 2012: 46-47). In other words, if the possession of several material capabilities was the sole indicator, the results will only determine the polarity of the system or, more precisely, to what extend it remains the United States’ primacy over the system. Hence, addressing hegemony only under this materialist methodology will be unable to determine how the exercise of power is developed or the building of the order around this preponderance of capabilities.

This inability to open the scope of the studies around hegemony is considered by this author as one of the main weaknesses of studies of hegemony and systemic change. Under a realist perspective, systemic transformations are characterized by changes in the accumulation of power resources that shift from one state to the rising challenger. Even though they have poorly developed it, even realist admit that the hegemonic state imposes a certain order that is the most beneficial for its goals. Under this order, the rising challenger finds itself underrepresented and constrained by an order build to prevent other states to gain more than the hegemon.

Undoubtedly, analysis of material distributions of power provides interesting information about the structure of the system and the constraints faced by great powers. Even constructivism admits that changes in the distribution of power matter, because they produce changes in great powers’ attitudes towards the normative structure, pushing them to defend, oppose or even boost new norms (Young, 2010: 4; Price, 1998: 635). However, in cases of high imbalances of power as the present one, materialist analyses say little about the international order build by the powerful state. It is true that material preponderance or primacy offer multiple opportunities for the dominant state

\textsuperscript{2} It should be note that not all of the scholars ascribed to realism adopt these extremely materialist approach. Neoclassical realists, for instance, propose the inclusion of several variables that do not fit in the materialist definition, as well as several classical realists.
to spread its influence and strength, but there is a need to legitimate it and construct a hegemonic status (Hurd, 2007: 204). Therefore, primacy constitutes the first and compulsory step towards hegemony, but a materially dominant state does not always become a hegemon. In other words, hegemony is a socially achieved status, built on rights, consent and legitimacy. Moreover, this distinction unfolds what it is usually called as hegemonic decline in two (intertwined) phenomena. The first, related to primacy and the inability of the dominant state to maintain itself as a world leader in terms of resources and capabilities. The second one is the crisis of the social order build by the hegemon to sustain its position. Both faces of the same coin, hegemony needs primacy, but primacy does not necessarily imply hegemony. Thus, any analysis of hegemony must address both realities: the power structure and the social order.

In this vein, it is necessary to advance towards a reconciliation of material and social approaches to understand, as Beyer notes, US predominance in a multidimensional way (Beyer, 2009). Material power should be understood as the way to achieve the monopoly of the production of cultural, social and symbolic capital justified and legitimized through multiple social structures (Schweller and Pu, 2011: 49).

As Guzzini rightly noted, the nature of international society does have an impact on the value of abilities, resources and the relevant issue areas (Guzzini, 2006: 124). Understanding the contemporary environment in a complex way—not just as a hobbesian order, but with mixed characteristics of Lockean and Kantian societies—any materialist view should understand power resources as, at the same time, hybrid and in constant evolution.

Moreover, what materialist lenses cannot explain is the character and the relationship between emerging powers and the international order. Materialist scholars tend to portray rising states as potentially dangerous, understanding that they will aim to use their material status to overturn the system. However, as others point out, the dissatisfaction of the rising state cannot be taken for granted. At this point, it is possible to agree with Schweller and Pu when they highlight that the future international order and a hypothetical rise of unipolarity depends directly on the roles played by emerging powers. In this vein, they draw three alternative options, going from support to the order and sharing of responsibilities, spoiling and dismantlement of the existing order and replacement, and finally, a free rider behavior that gets the privileges of this power position without contributing to global governance (Schweller and Pu, 2011).

Definitely, states’ attitudes towards the international system are not solely materially determined. One can argue, as some realist did, that states with growing capabilities will definitely be revisionist, but as the hegemonic succession between United Kingdom and the United States exemplifies, some transitions can be progressive and peaceful. Therefore, the rise of the conflict not only depends on how the emergent state behaves, but also how the former hegemon manages its decline.

At this point, the identities that the rising state performs gain special attention. However, it is necessary to have in mind that great powers’ rise not only involves the emerging state, but also the relation between this state, on the one hand, and the

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3 The distinction between power structure and social order as components of hegemony is developed by Barry Buzan (2004: 48).
hegemon and the international order it has built, on the other. Therefore, it constitutes a two-way process that cannot be isolated. As Buzan and Cox summarize, rising powers can emerge conflictively or peacefully. The conflictual scenario, as drawn by realist, supposes that emerging powers will try to overturn the system to gain the most. On the contrary, the peaceful model, whether positively or negatively, involves a war free scenario, although the negative peaceful rise may involve growing threateningly. What this taxonomy suggests is that for peaceful rise to be achieved, the authors maintain, the rising power should be able to get both material and social gains in absolute and relative terms without the need to precipitate an open war (Buzan and Cox, 2013: 112). Undoubtedly, the hegemon has in its hands the chance to accommodate the rising power and balance the gain and status inequality to improve rising state’s satisfaction with the system, but it will inevitably narrow the gap between both states’ relative power distribution and conflict with the hegemon’s own interests.

3. Towards a new conceptualization of hegemony. A mixed material-social notion

As it has been addressed in the previous part, the existence of a gap between material and social approaches of IRT is more that evident. Even though this analysis has highlighted the antagonist construction of concepts on both sides, it is possible to argue that this dissonance is based on a wrongly understood relation between the concepts of primacy/unipolarity and hegemony. Undeniably linked as intertwined concepts, Wilkinson differentiates them in the following way:

“If hegemony is understood as a unipolar configuration of politico-military capability with a structure of influence that matches capability, unipolarity without hegemony is a configuration where the preponderant capability of a single state is not matched by a predominant influence. Such a structure embodies the distinction drawn by Jean-Jacques Rousseau between "strength" and "mastery" (Wilkinson, 1999: 143).

Under the same logic, unipolarity is possible without hegemony, but there cannot exist hegemony without unipolarity. It should be admitted that the realist claim on the importance of material resources for hegemony is partially true. Material capabilities constitute the cornerstone of primacy or unipolar structures. As Ikenberry argues in the case of the United States after WWII, the new redistribution of power offers to the unipole a broad bunch of choices, including domination, transformation or abandonment (Ikenberry, 2001: 3-4). Whatever the unipole decides, the outcomes are not automatic, agency is involved. In this case, the transformation of these power disparities into hegemony constitutes a conscious strategy of order creation and institutional restraint.

This transformations involving agency that characterize the turn from unipolarity to hegemony. In a relevant turning point, several English School scholars will advance that hegemony refers to an institutionalized and legitimized practice on the international society that occurs in situations of material primacy. (Clark, 2011: 34). Hence, materialist approaches that defined hegemony in material terms where only describing its prerequisite of primacy, but neglecting the institutional and legitimacy structures that do, in practice, conform hegemony.
This distinction makes possible to evolve towards a more complex definition of hegemony. Under this approach, hegemony is defined as a relation of social and informal hierarchy build on a legitimized and socialized international order. This order is mainly composed by a strong institutional network and a dominant set of identities, interests and practices underpinned by an extraordinary portfolio of material capabilities and resources\textsuperscript{4}. In other words, the idea of hegemony is inherently linked to a proposal of an international order that the hegemon aims to lead (Cox, 1996: 136). To be universal, this order should be compatible with the interests of other states, to gain their compliance. This way, the hegemonic status mutates from the state to the order it builds, and it is precisely this order what becomes legitimized through a social arrangement. This agreement roots on the belief that the hegemonic state can positively contribute not only to international stability, but to the international society itself, instead of supposing a threat (Clark, 2011: 4)\textsuperscript{5}.

The hegemonic international order constructed around the hegemon’s dominance constitutes a cornerstone case for analyzing hegemony. However, it must be understood as an order in motion that will suffer transformations in response to the changing systemic dynamics on the material and social structures. This point is precisely what explains the accurateness to accomplish an analysis of hegemony regarding to US hegemony. Many scholars hold the expectations that, as a response to the latest changes in the distribution of material and social power, US liberal hegemonic order will evolve or event dissolve (Young, 2010: 4). Even though the hegemonic order continues to be one of the most defining features of the contemporary international society, it is true that the transformations on the material power realm (the rise of the rest, especially China; the European crisis) have questioned several aspects of this order.

4. Methodological proposal of hegemony

The present project aims to highlight the complex and hybrid nature of the concept of hegemony by proposing a complex methodology to approach towards empirical analysis. Even if material variables have been presented as relevant on the study of state’s role, it is also necessary to understand them on a broader social picture. It is not only necessary to contextualize material variables within the dynamics and practices of international society. Moreover, how states decide to organize, understand and project them has a vital explanatory power. On this vein, in methodological terms, there are four poles of variables to advance towards a complete examination of hegemony in international society.

The first one is related to the material structure of power. Even though it is considered that it has been overanalyzed, it is also true that polarity and material power still constitutive bases for the hegemony. The second group of variables addresses the institutional practice of hegemony, through an analysis of the regimes and organizations

\textsuperscript{4} For the composition of this definition, I have relied mainly on several conceptualizations of the concept considered as constructivist or English School’s. Clark, 2011; Beyer, 2009; Bukovansky, 2010.

\textsuperscript{5} It should be noted that this claim breaks with traditional English School approaches to hegemony, that considered it to be a threat to international society. One of the most notable exception among the English School foundational scholars was Adam Watson (Watson, 2007). On the contemporary developments, Clark reconciles Bull and Watson’s approaches by building a theory on the institutionalization of hegemony that, in practice, recognizes the existence of a grade of hierarchy among anarchy (Clark, 2011).
promoted by the hegemon from 1945 and its actual accommodation, as well as the nascent web of non-hegemonic institutions that are gradually concentrating alternative practices. Thirdly, identity and socialization practices need to be addressed, paying especial attention to the multiple identities that both the United States and China hold, as well as the processes of socialization, accommodation and confrontation. Finally, the third pole will advance towards an analysis of the legitimacy practices that take place within international society, which are highly influenced by material, institutional and identity variables.

4.1. The material power structure

At this point, it is possible to tag the distribution of power among great powers as a crucial variable for the materialist analysis. Great powers are usually defined by the combination of capabilities in several scopes ranging from economic strength, military budget or technology. In contrast, Levy offers a less materialist vision, maintaining that great powers can be identified by three main characteristics. The first is their huge military capability and their projection of power abroad. As a result, great powers tend to be strategically self-sufficient and have strong foreign policy targets. Secondly, their concept of security is not only regional but global. Finally, they have both the capacity and the assertiveness to defend their interests globally (Levy, 1983: 11-19). This composed conceptualization of great powers supports the present multidimensional analysis that will start, but not finish, with the material structure.

By turning to a more analytical definition, Levy avoids the criticism towards materialist views, leaded by Waltz, which tend to wrongly equate capabilities and resources. In Reus-Smit’s view, some of the components of Waltz’ lists are resources, and just two can be equated as capabilities (economic and military strength) (Reus-Smit, 2007: 161-162). Therefore, most of IR literature assumes the equation that sees capabilities and resources as synonyms and analyses power just in terms of the addition of all of them.

4.2. Institutional order

Even if institutions usually constitute a controversial object of study in international politics, the contemporary international society’s growing institutional network supports, at least, addressing them as an important variable of the international. One can agree that institutions are a reflection of the distribution of material capabilities and that serve the interest of the dominant states, as neorealist have more than once stated. However, that seems a too simplistic argument to omit them in the analysis. Liberals’ emphasis on institutions as the way to strength cooperation fails in the same mistake as the realist one. As Reus-Smit argues, neither of these perspectives can explain why some institutions endure changes in the balance of power and why institutions that may seem conflictual emerge in the same structural conditions (Reus-Smit, 1997: 556).

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6 Waltz, for example, lists the following variables: size of population and territory; resource endowment; economic capability; military strength; political stability; and competence. Waltz (1979: 131).
In the case study, two different phenomena should be addressed. Firstly, it is necessary to tackle the contemporary liberal international order, its main institutions, the most recurrent patterns of institutional order and the global character of this order, as they are, in practice, tools to channel the hegemon’s material power, routinize and legitimize it. Secondly, Chinese participation in this international order must be addressed. As Buzan affirms, it is important to think about how best to characterize the relationship between China and the international society (Buzan: 2010: 16). In other words, it has to be contrasted Qin’s opinion that maintains that China is increasingly pro status quo, not just instrumentally, but ideationally, as it accepts the values underlying the international society. Following Buzan, the dualism between status quo and reformism/revisionism comprises two questions at the same time: on the one hand, if China is satisfied with its status in the international society and, on the other, whether it accepts or contests the institutions of the society.

Finally, in the present case study, the rising state’s institutional building strategies should be studied, as an alternative to the hegemonic international order. For that purpose, the main driving principles to this strategy and the serving interest should be outlined. In other words, the alternative institutional frameworks constitute a basic clue to disentangle how China sees the world and which strategies will it follow in the future.

4.3. Identity and socialization

In IR analysis, the role of identity gains special relevance in certain contexts defined by its complexity. Far from the ontological security that characterized the Cold War, the actual context is increasingly uncertain due to the rapid transformations of the international system. Identities, along with institutions and legitimacy, transform and give meaning to the distributions of power. Therefore, identities constitute important elements in the two-way relationship between agents and structure.

In the specific case of US hegemony and China’s rise, identities play different roles. In a general sense, identities serve three main social functions: they tell the subject how is it, they tell the rest who the subject is and, finally, they tell the subject who are the rest (Tajfel, 1981: 255). However, the role of identities in this case becomes more complex. The relations between different subjects is usually understood as a Hegelian alter and ego relationship, where the alter transforms the ego’s identity. In other words, this type of relation mirrors the victory of one of the subjects over the other. In great power relationships and power transitions, the Hegelian pattern is represented by portraying the rising challenger as a threat, both the identities of the hegemon and the rising power being exclusive. The struggle for the great power status, therefore, is an exclusive relationship with only one victor.

Even if identities are important for every state, they matter in different ways. In the case of the United States, as the hegemon of the system, its role implies the clash between two identities, as Cronin rightly illustrated (Cronin, 2001: 104-105). The first one is its identity as a hegemon, related to notions of legitimacy and leadership; the second is its great power identity, connected to its material capabilities and its believed exceptional nature. Both maintain a tension between the audiences they relate to,
international and domestic, and the clashing interests they demand. Therefore, it is important to address the identities the United States plays in international society and which type of actions corresponds to each of them.

In the case of China, its label as a rising power leads, at least for realist theories, to tag it as a revisionist and as a threat to the system’s stability. In these theories, a rising power has been purely defined by its increasing material capabilities. However, as Miller suggests, “rising powers are distinguished by very specific kinds of domestic beliefs” (Miller, 2016: 211). Rising powers, as candidates for great power status, will have an increasing influence in the international structure, the major processes and even the future developments of the international system. The development of a more inclusive category of rising power, with the addition of beliefs, identities and interests, makes it possible to analyze Chinese future aspirations as a great power and its engagement with international responsibilities (Miller, 2016: 237). To advance an analysis of China’s identity as a rising state, it is interesting to analyze the three types of behavior that usually these states accomplish (Miller, 2016: 217). Firstly, emerging powers seek to acquire more material capabilities to match those of the status quo states. Secondly, rising powers’ national interests expand from a regional scope to a global one and become more complex. Thirdly, rising states witness an increasing internal recognition of its growing status and wish to extend into external audiences. For this purpose, they usually develop communicative acts towards a reaffirmation of their role and their growing interests. An analysis of identity aims to provide the foundations of the alternative hegemonic institutions that both states propose. It will help in the identification of clashes and convergences and will provide the perfect starting point to determine the prospects to establish a legitimate hegemony.

4.4. Hegemonic legitimacy

Legitimacy plays a crucial role in international society as the base of shared knowledge and the normative structure of the system (Bukovansky, 2010: 2). As it has been stated previously, it constitutes an essential factor in the international system and constitutes a vital concept to understand hegemony. Moreover, as a practical concept, legitimacy is inherently linked to the other three constitutes of hegemonic power: material resources, institutional order and identity. Firstly, although usually misunderstood, the relationship between the material resources of power and legitimacy is quite relevant. Researchers that understand power as relational rather than relative stress the contribution of legitimacy to compulsory power by inducing voluntary compliance within the international society. Under this statement, power is not material, but social, because legitimacy is perceptual and, moreover, these perceptions are rooted in other social variables such as norms, beliefs and values (Bukovansky, Clark, Eckersley et al, 2012: 69-70; Rapkin and Braaten, 2009). Two reasons strengthen this point. Firstly, legitimacy is linked to the institutions and regimes as well as to the normative structure, not only because the perception of an actor as legitimate is made within the boundaries of these norms, but because of the role of the institutional structure as a legitimizing field.
Secondly, identities and legitimacy constitute two permeable fields. As legitimacy, especially in its substantive variant, is profoundly influenced by the actor’s values, the identities above these values influence the perception of an actor as legitimate. That is, the identity it plays in certain contexts will profoundly influence others’ perceptions. For instance, when the United States decided to contravene international norms and intervene in Iraq, it played its role as a great power to its internal audiences, instead of its identity as a hegemon bestowed with special responsibilities. This way, the practices derived from these actions undermined its legitimacy and, for some authors, generated a crisis or soft balancing behaviors (Pape, 2005; Reus-Smit, 2007; Hurd, 2007). On the same vein, legitimation processes transform and determine the units in the social system, constituting not only a two-way process but a mutually transformative one.

Therefore, the analysis of legitimacy will inevitably derive from some of the conclusions draw from other variables. However, legitimacy should be understood in its deeper sense. It is possible to identify two narratives of the concept in its relation with hegemony, the superficial and the constitutive. The superficial narrative highlights the notion of legitimate domination achieved with the internalization by secondary states of norms and principles socialized by the hegemon. This process, as defined by Ikenberry and Kupchan, results on the internalization of these norms and principles that guide these states’ conceptions of order (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990: 49). However, this notion only highlights the direct returns of legitimation and defines the process as unidirectional, missing the transformative effects of legitimacy on the hegemon’s identity and the institution of hegemony as a whole. On the contrary, the constitutive notion understands legitimacy practices as dynamic and continuously contested narratives that transform endlessly the hegemon and secondary states’ identity, as well as the international society.

5. Empirical analysis. The rise of China within US hegemony

In this century, the Pacific has become the most dynamic economic and military area of the international society. Undoubtedly, these changes in the economic sphere have turned into a growing interest in the region and also an increasing relevance of these emerging states, especially in the case of China. Its impressive economic rates and its growing international interests have prompted its participation in leading international political forums. Indeed, its inclusion on the great powers’ club has shaken not only the economy and finance, but also the international system as a whole. However, it should not be forgotten that the material transformations occurred in the present century should be understood under a U.S.-led international system. Its role as a hegemon, although sometimes contested, is the main characteristic of the international structure, even if these recent changes have propelled the declinist thesis.

5.1. A materialist analysis of the hegemonic succession. Economic, financial and military structures

Over the last sixty years, the United States has held a continued domination of what Strange called the world’s production structure that has sustained its leadership in
the global economy. In other words, its position as the biggest market for manufactured goods and its influence in global economies through credit due to the role of the dollar as global currency have underpinned and reinforced its mastery (Strange, 1987: 566-568).

The rise of new poles of economic power, especially centered in the East Asian region, has obscured the stability of the United States economy. Despite the economic slowdown after the crisis, the American economy has not stagnated yet. However, it is true that it perpetuates several weaknesses that have been softened by its leading role as hegemon. Even with the outbreak of the financial crisis of 2008, imploded in its own financial system, the United States has managed to maintain its economic primacy. In fact, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) only contracted for two years, and after that period recovered its growth to nearly pre-crisis figures. What it is more striking is that, after the globalization of the financial slowdown, the leadership of U.S.-led economic institutions continues, despite the crisis of the neoliberal capitalist order. As Ikenberry noted, it is true that the crisis “has served to tarnish the American model of liberal capitalism” (Ikenberry, 2012: 5). Critical scholars go further and proclaim that the material bases of American hegemony are “broken” and the social, ideological, political and institutional dimension of hegemony are “severely undermined” (Saull, 2012: 335).

In the case of China, the crisis performed differently. The country raised impressively in the first decade of the century, with a more than 10% growth rates between 2003 and 2007. Even if the economic downturn slowed its economy, it can be said that the country was relatively insulated from the center of the crisis, protected by its financially strong banking system and its large foreign reserves (Whalley, 2013: 11). However, Chinese dependency on trade raised doubts about its immunization.

Even considering the important consequences and partial imbalances resulting from the economic crisis, figures show the growing trajectories of both economies. On the one hand, the United States’ economy presented several signs of slowing down that were contained through an ambitious stimulus program amounting $U.S. 800 billion and it is annually ranked as one of the ten most competitive economies in the world. In spite of its position as a mature economy, it has not followed a traditional pattern of decline and has been able to “rejuvenate” through innovation, leading technological areas and the information technology (Rapkin and Thompson, 2003: 324).

The emergence of new economic poles and the slowdown of developed economies have slightly changed the global economic leadership. After the United States and China, Japan and Germany are the third and fourth world economies, but with less than a half of China’s GDP. The supremacy of the United States and China in economic terms is absolute, both together accumulate more that 35% of the world’s GDP. There is no doubt that the global economy is highly influenced, or even dominated, by the interactions between both countries, to the extent that some foretell that “[a] de facto G2 is emerging almost by default, even though neither China nor the U.S. will give their relationship this grandiose title” (Garrett, 2010: 29).

In military terms, the rebalance in the Asia-Pacific area in this century has been among the most debated issues in military and international relations scholarship.

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7 Concretely, the United States GDP decreased 0.5% and 4.2% in 2008 and 2009, respectively, but latter increased its rates, achieving 2.4% of growth in 2010, according to the World Bank data.
Particularly, the balance of military and strategic forces of the major powers in the region has opened a vivid debate about the role of the hegemon in its region and its relations with the rising challenger. These movements occur in a region that is facing a “geopolitical transition” as the changes on the new millennium urge for realignment in the U.S.-led alliance system that has dominated the region in the previous decades (Liff and Ikenberry, 2014: 55).

It cannot be denied that the dynamism of the Asia-Pacific region is accompanied by a circle of rising military budgets, mostly caused by the changing material distributions, the region’s economic growth and the surging military expending (Liff and Ikenberry, 2014: 52).

The mastery of the United States military is unquestionable, as it has been along all the unipolar era. As Montgomery summarises, “the United States has needed to mobilise and deploy its units over an extended period of time, deploy and sustain them over air and sea lines of communication stretching across continents, and gain access to overseas facilities capable of accommodating its expeditionary forces and their large logistical ‘tail’” (Montgomery, 2014: 128). The multiple compromises that the hegemon has maintained over its unipolarity have raised questions about the sustainability of this strategy. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet threat, the United States’ mastery was no longer in question and the hegemon had to face a redefinition of its foreign strategy, with great implications for its actual military power.

The issue of the Chinese military expenditures and the modernisation of its army have constituted a topic of special concern for academics, military theories as well as the media. Undoubtedly, China is devoting “substantial resources” to its defence, mainly centred in the naval, air, missile, spatial and C4ISR capabilities, but also ground forces, that have contributed to transform the PLA into a professional and competitive force. Even though its investments have been quite impressive, nowadays the United States expends more in military than the next seven countries together (36% of world). It has the ability to project its military power globally and retains untouchable its ability to destroy. However, what it is more questionable, especially due to the events following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is if it retains the capability to rebuilt.

5.2. The contemporary liberal hegemonic order. Institutional reproduction, accommodation and contestation

Undeniably, the institutional order is highly influenced by a dominant narrative of the international society produced and reproduced by the great power(s). However, the evolution of these organisations develops several fields of internal contestation that alter the reproduction of this hegemonic narrative. In the case of changing material and social power dynamics, institutions become interesting grounds of collision between the prevalent hegemonic dynamics of the dominant state and the growing alternative approaches to international politics. At some point, the hegemon, seeking to bind the hegemonic hierarchy and gain legitimacy, has to face a rising state’s push for status, accommodation and/or contestation.

An analysis of institutions as actors of international society reveals its nature not only as instruments of cooperation but also as multilateral organs where identities, status, material power, socialisation and legitimacy dialogue. The importance of
institutions on the analysis of hegemony highlights the two faces of power politics that coexist in these processes: material distributions of power and ideational and normative factors. Even if material power has an important influence in the great power status within institutions, ideational factors such as identity, socialisation and legitimacy directly transform institutions and norms.

This duality is also reflected in the rise of China, not only characterised by an impressive growth of material power, but also by social and ideational factors. In Zhang’s words, the acceptance and recognition of China as part of the great powers club, as well as the sharing of responsibilities on the international society provides China with a limited but influential ground to transforms the institutional and normative environment (Zhang, 2011: 236).

The influence of material capabilities in institutional practices is not limited to the internal status. On the case of U.S. material power, Foot et al. identify two distinct dynamics that generate tension on the hegemon’s behaviour (Foot, 2003: 11). On the one hand, its impressive power resources generate a “take it or leave it” attitude on the hegemon, as it has the certainty that it can accomplish any task on its own. Even if it is true that in military and security issues the hegemon is not constrained by institutions, the process of globalisation has pushed the hegemon to promote multipolarity and global cooperation in economic, financial and environmental issues.

As Mastanduno explains, United States’ approach to economic institutions has changed during the Cold War. In the 70’s and 80’s, it experienced a shift to bilateralism after constructing the most important financial and economic institutions. However, the end of the Cold War was reinforced by a turn to multipolarity and also by a strengthening of existing organisations (WTO, APEC). These shifts show, in the author’s opinion, that the hegemon’s preference towards a particular type of relationship is mainly driven by the objectives it wants to address and the regional and global opportunities and constraints it faces (Mastanduno, 2007: 31).

The post-2008 environment is also in line with this pragmatism. The hegemon has practised a growing cooperation with China in economic and environmental issues, but has strengthened its unipolarity and hypocrisy on security cooperation. On the other hand, the U.S. is aware of institutions’ assistance to preserve the international status quo and takes advantage of it not only to legitimate its actions, but also to set its interests as global goals.

The hegemon’s institutional practice reinforces its identity as an exceptional member. It is an exceptionalism based on its unilateralism and immunity to international criticism, a pretended universality of identity and interests, strong domestic processes that can sometimes contradict global compromises and an understanding of institutions as optional (Luck, 2003: 27). Due to this exceptionalism, U.S. exercises the above described “division of labour” in cooperation, sometimes dealt through institutional frames and other through bilateral or unilateral actions. Even with this ambivalence, the hegemon is aware of the positive sides of multilateralism to its leadership, extremely multiplied by its high immunity to the institutional constraints (Foot, 2003: 1).

Due to its exceptionality, U.S. influence is huge even in forums and institutions in which it does not take part, which it can reinforce (as in the case of the EU or ASEAN) or weaken and discredit (as recent attempts towards the AIIB show). In the case of global
Institutions in which the hegemon actively participates, they hold an important autonomy but are usually constrained by the overwhelming material and vote power within them. In this vein, a point made by Russett is really relevant. Understanding Keohane’s claims that institutions could survive after hegemony and continue providing outcomes, Russett warns that the decline of the hegemon may make difficult to promote new levels of cooperation capable to address new and more complex problems (Russett, 1985: 222), as it happens with economy or climate change, as well as transnational terrorism.

The strong solidarist characteristics of the international society promoted by the hegemon, which has paid relevant attention to individual rights and democracy and liberty promotion, constituted a great challenge to accommodate China in its early stages, mainly after 1970s. The task to meet the “standard of civilisation” was accomplish through a unilateral accommodation strongly pushed by the international hierarchy. However, China’s growing material power has made it stronger to turn this unilateral accommodation to a new process of change within the system. Therefore, nowadays China holds what Buzan has called mixed satisfaction towards the international society, with a strong support towards pluralist institutions of coexistence and an attitude of contestation and opposition towards those that reinforce liberal solidarist values (Buzan, 2010: 17).

China’s preference towards pluralist institutions marks its promotion of new organisations and regimes, with a clear resemble of its bilateral diplomacy that promoted development without any reference to national sovereign issues. Moreover, these new institutions rarely settle an open confrontation with the hegemon or its institutions, publicly promoting multilateralism and cooperation. However, some of these organisations actually confront the U.S.-led cooperation model, especially in development and security cooperation and seek to discredit and erode the model that the hegemon has promoted over the years.

It could be argued that recent Chinese push for new institutions constitutes an attempt to complete its process of accommodation. As Bukovansky argues, this process should be done through a search of common ideas by the dominant and rising powers (Bukovansky, 2016: 87). In the case of China, its accommodation was done through a process of institutional socialisation, with a growing involvement in global forums. Adopting Qin’s terminology, the process of socialisation was not mutually transformative, but homogenising, and only transformed and integrated one of the subjects, China, as a result of the victory of one subject (the Western international society and the U.S.) over the other (Qin, 2010: 141-142).

This practice is grounded on “complacency about the character, depth and sources” of the order that omits the possibility that rising powers may seek a development of an alternative system or, at least, a profound reform of the existing one (Bukovansky, 2016: 94). In other words, it is a way of socialisation that only understands the rising power as a “norm taker” and failures to accommodate it as “norm makers” (Bukovansky, 2016: 94), a definition that better fits due to recent Chinese attempts to build alternative institutions.
5.3. **Identities in flux in a changing international society. Processes of socialization in the China-U.S. relations**

The importance of the processes of socialisation in international relations is been growingly recognised. Hence, it is important to note that it has a double meaning. On the one hand, it acknowledges the relevance of the process, as relational theory highlights, as both processes and relations have a significant role on the development of international norms and the evolution of actor’s identity. On the other hand, to address this processes successfully, socialisation among actors should be done on a two-way process that transforms all the actors. This way, this opposing poles interact in non-conflictual relations that evolve towards a harmonious synthesis that includes elements of both poles.

The analysis of processes between the United States and China is not an easy task, as interactions are multidimensional. Moreover, as the characterisation of both states’ interactions as “superficial friendship” suggest, relations usually tend to be egoistic and strategic. Differing in its content and favourability, Yan proposes four types of relations depending on states’ interests: common, complementary, confrontational and conflicting (Yan, 2010: 272-273).

5.3.1. **Global leadership**

The issue of global leadership can be tagged as the more difficult one to become an inclusive non-conflictual process among the ones analysed. Despite the difficulties of avoiding what has been named as the “Thucydides trap”, the process is nearly impossible to be non-conflictualized as both what to get the same prize: lead the system in a way that is more beneficial to itself and build an institution of hegemony around to lock its leadership. Even if both states have publicly stated that they aim to avoid a conflict over leadership, clashes of interests repeat in issues such as territorial claims, economy or the status of Taiwan.

From the political turn of Nixon administration, the U.S. has managed to approach carefully to China. It is true that U.S. post-1979 involvement with China has had the greater impact on its emergence as a rising power. As a result, the Asian country has been successfully socialised as a norm taker on international society, even if these processes can be discussed. However, the success of this process could be explained by the hierarchical relation that characterised both states’ interactions in these early stages. Nowadays, the relationship is approaching horizontality and most conflictual points regard the conceptualisation of the relation. The United States try to impose its hierarchical position while China pushes for a more equal on.

Moreover, the reproduction of identities of the other that are difficult to cope with has shifted the strategy of engagement towards one more close to deterrence. Even if the U.S. administration during Bush and Obama’s presidencies has shown shifting strategies towards China, the shadow of a possible threat to U.S. hegemony has make the relation colder, while many in China have the impression that the hegemon has been treating their country unfairly (Lampton, 2015). As Zhao summarises, in China it persists a latent sense that the great consensus, characterised by a convergence on fundamental strategic interests, has come to the end. Prior to 2001, the United States pursued a
strategy of engagement towards China, trying to integrate it into the hegemonic international society. At the same time, China wanted to be integrated in this Western international society and, therefore, the strategy of grand consensus, supported by some shared strategic interests, succeeded (Zhao, 2017: 6). After 2001, with the accession of China to the WTO, this integration could be seen as completed and U.S. strategy of engagement started to blur as they saw that the Chinese were no longer willing to concede to U.S. preferences. As a result, the strategic cooperation was over and they had to approach every crisis individually, with clashes in issues as energy, environment or economy.

The demise of the grand consensus has produced cooperation on specific areas without a mayor consensus on how the relations between both powers should be. The proposal of the creation of the G2 or Xi Jinping’s “new model of great power relations” have been futile attempts to establish a major framework for the relations between the two countries that would eventually produce formal and informal norms that would reduce hostility. However, in this specific case, both states have interests that are mutually unfavourable towards the same goal of global leadership. It is unlikely that a peaceful transition as the previous one between the U.S. and the U.K. would occur, because the institution of hegemony that every state projects permeates its identities that, in this case, are really heterogeneous. In the U.K.-U.S. case, the prevalence of the Western identity, along with the historical ties between both cultures, facilitated the peaceful resolution of the transition. To approach this outcome, both the U.S. and China have to work towards the establishment of ties that generate, in Qin’s terminology, a new synthesis that has elements of both. How-ever, threatening rhetorics and the gradually clash of interests sustains that as time moves forward, the achievement of this new synergy is, at least, unlikely.

5.3.2. Environmental issues

Under Yan’s taxonomy of types of interests, the environmental issues, targeted as conflicting, look as the less likely candidate for a cooperative and non-hostile process of relations among the ones analysed. However, against any prediction, environmental processes of cooperation could be targeted as moderately successful in the past, especially under the second term of Obama’s presidency. Undoubtedly, the most transcendent point was the successful negotiation of the Paris Agreement prior to the 2015 summit and the performative reproduction of this agreement on the simultaneous ratification during the G20 meeting in Hangzhou in 2016.

Environmental issues, as economics, involve several complications due to their complexity and their transversal nature, as they have relation with economics, energy, public health, industry or diplomacy, among others. Moreover, the issue gets even more complex with the different patterns of growth and globalisation processes that coexist in countries in different stages of industrialisation. In environmental cooperation, the targeting of states as developed or in process of development complicates negotiations, as emerging countries ask for more flexible measures to protect their development and more implication and emission cuts for rich countries. Underneath every environmental negotiation between the United States and China, there is the conflict whether to consider China as a developing or developed country.
Although important differences still prevail, it can be said that both states, the world top polluters accounting more than 40% of global emissions, actively joined the processes of cooperation and have worked to change the hostile structure. At this point, it is interesting to confront the previously mentioned negotiations over the Paris Agreement on 2015 with the Copenhagen Agreement in 2009, where no binding agreement was reached.

As it has been stated, the cooperation in Paris generated a new framework on climate change that has been ratified by major powers and entered into force in 2016. However, the recent withdrawal from the Paris Agreement by the Trump Administration evidences that even successful issues as climate change can easily activate exceptionalist identities. On this vein, Chinese joint compromise with the European Union to save the agreements on this issue should be welcomed, especially remembering China's past reluctance to bind itself on global climate change agreements. Even though it is still early, American exceptionalism on climate change is probably opening a fissure on the global legitimacy of the US as a leader capable of reuniting around itself the global consent. It is not the first time that the hegemon neglects binding itself on climate agreements, but the moment it has been done, with China strengthening its relations with Asia, Africa and, more importantly, the European Union, could multiply the consequences of Trump's decision.

5.4. Hegemonic legitimacy in a changing international society United States' hegemonic institution and China's alternative

After the end of WWII, the United States has held a prominent position in international society that has transcended the special responsibilities of great powers. Undoubtedly, one of the main characteristics of the U.S. institution of hegemony form its origins is its Western and liberal nature. It was based on “the proliferation of competing centers of political authority and the promotion of formal territorial sovereignty” or, in other words, “in a world of open doors (capitalist markets) and closed frontiers (territorially sovereign states)” (Colas and Saull, 2005: 3).

On the same vein, authors multiply the sources of legitimacy that underpinned the U.S. hegemony after the Cold War (Tucker and Hendrickson, 2004). Several deserve special attention, as, for instance, the open and consensual mode of decision-making among the Western bloc, mainly channelled through institutions. Its moderation in policy as well as its adherence to international law it is usually named as other pillars; but it main success was the preservation of peace, security and prosperity through institutions, cooperation and active engagement.

However, during the period of U.S. hegemony, several claims of decline and crisis of legitimacy have been raised. Even though decline refers to primacy and crisis of legitimacy is related to hegemony, usually both claims have been intertwined and confused. After its success on WWII and the post-war hegemonic leadership, the United States started to face several economic and political problems on the 1970s, which gave rise to the declinist thesis. Some authors, as Clark, even consider that United States hegemony ended in this period (Clark, 2012). However, material and social analysis evidence that, even suffering turmoil, the hegemon was capable not only to maintain its
primacy (militarily and also economically), but also its social legitimacy to face the end of the Cold War.

The end of the conflict generated an expansion of the U.S. institution of hegemony towards the non-Western states. Surprisingly, through this exercise of adaptation, the United States reinforced and refreshed the legitimacy of its institution, even though it maintained a restricted membership on several secondary institutions. These processes of accommodation usually take place on a hierarchical way and states in process of accommodation are socialised as norm takers, and then they face a race towards a growing status within the system. As it has been stated, after the Cold War, the institution of hegemony reinforced in the absence of a threat, but at the same time the hegemon faced a profound crisis of identity.

The disappearance of the Soviet Union and the weakness of Russia as a potential rival pushed for a reconfiguration of the United States identity that culminated in 2001, when the 9/11 terrorist attacks pointed out towards the new global threat. However, the following events headed the world towards a profound crisis of legitimacy of the institution of hegemony. In this case, the decision by the Bush Administration to go to war against Iraq cracked legitimacy in two different ways. Firstly, the intervention was carried out without the approval of the United Nations Security Council, which eroded strongly the hegemon’s legitimacy as restraint and adherence to the principles of international law are strong pillars of legitimacy and root on the sources of the institution of hegemony.

Secondly, the unilateral turn of the hegemon also highlighted the absence of consensus and the non-participation of other great powers on the decision-making process. For all these reason, same suggested that the intervention on Iraq prompted a crisis of legitimacy (Hurd, 2007; Reus-Smit, 2007; Kagan, 2004). However, as Hurd argues, a narrower analysis of the event may show a deliberate attempt to delegitimise the norms of intervention agreed within the international society. Under this consideration, Hurd explains that this deliberated attack on international law aimed to legitimate new norms on pre-emption (Hurd, 2007). In other words, instead of legitimating its actions through norms, the hegemon wanted to legitimate new norms through practice, corrupting the relation between actions, norms and legitimacy. In a general sense, the actuation according to norms constituted a source of legitimacy. However, the hegemon considered itself bestowed with legitimacy and wrongly perceived that its actions were legitimated per se. From that point, it tried to establish new norms through practice that would change the consensus towards new boundaries in the use of force.

Simultaneously to the changing nature of United States’ institution of hegemony, that has managed to reinforce several of its legitimacy bases after crises, China is thoroughly trying to strengthen its worldwide influence, improve ties with other states and reinforce and expand its legitimacy. However, a closer look suggests that there are several weak points that the country must advance on to pose a credible alternative to the U.S. institution of hegemony.

One of the most iconic problems of China on its legitimacy on international society regards substantive legitimacy. The United States took advantage of its non-colonial and Anglo-Saxon identity to build a Western transatlantic partnership that, in
practice, has been the main component of the Western identity rooted on shared values, principles and interest. China, however, has difficulties on strengthening ties with its Asian neighbours, due to its increasing power, its military modernization and its past as a regional hegemon. Even though Japan also holds a belligerent past towards its neighbours, China’s rapid emergence has increased the threat perception. To confront this dynamic, China is trying to cooperate more closely with its Asian neighbours in terms of security and, more importantly, economy, both through the newly created institutions and also through an active partnership with the ASEAN.

China is also trying to reinforce its claims to “Asian values”, as they are the base of the construction of a distinctive regional international society. As Buzan suggest, the project of constructing this regional international society embrace a “postcolonial view of global international society, and would necessarily mean a more decentralised global order”. On this line, the post-crisis international society offer a great opportunity to advance on this model, as these experimental alternatives, in Buzan words, can advance on a more pluralist management of the global international society relying on peaceful coexistence, trade and environmental issues (Buzan 2010: 34-35).

However, by the moment, China is not succeeding on the socialisation of its role as a great power based on Asian values. Even though it has rhetorically been quite stuck to its rhetoric as a peaceful rise state, its power still generates clashes. Simultaneously, the Chinese government has discovered its major source of legitimacy among medium and small power: the attractiveness of its economic and development model. The success on economy has raised Chinese status within the great power club and, moreover, has constituted an example to rising states. Relying on this influence, it has leveraged its rising foreign investment to channel a growing number of projects to this audience. The progressive expansion of the OBOR initiative as well as the AIIB will work on this path, expanding the notion of China as a reliable cooperation partner and the more dynamic developing actor on the non-Western world. It is this model, along with the strengthening the trust among its neighbours, the most important task for China to constitute a credible and successful alternative.

It is true that China has made notable improvements. It has successfully improved is attractiveness as an institutional hub, as the expansion and active engagement of states in the organisation it promotes exemplifies. This has temporally concurred with a growing Chinese involvement in international affairs with the demise of the policy of “keeping a low profile”. This shift has evidenced that China has somehow subsumed its self-interest on a broader notion as a responsible state, understanding that its national developments is inherently linked to the global one. On this vein, Chinese legitimacy will be influenced by how it balances the two main identities that it is trying to socialise: on the one hand, a status quo responsible power that aims to take greater responsibilities and increase its status and, on the other hand, its identity as a reformist emerging power that wants to promote a new type of relations. However, once its power increases both identities will inevitably mutate on a complex one, a reformist responsible hegemonic successor. The Chinese explicit defence of globalisation and global economic cooperation performed in Davos is clearly related to the turbulences that the uncertain policies in the United States in recent times. After the withdrawal of the hegemon from the TPP, the Paris Agreement and the calls for a more
nationalist economic policy, the Chinese government has responded with a strong defence of these global processes and has bestowed itself as the main driver of them. This progressive role as the main economic responsible constitutes an interesting movement of China towards achieving greater legitimation through its greater involvements, something that will increase while U.S. continues its disentanglement from several of the bases of its hegemonic institution, such as globalisation, transatlantic alliances or adherence to international law and human rights promotion.

6. Conclusions

The theoretical approach to hegemony evidences the need to build bridges between different research projects to construct a comprehensive approach that understands hegemony both as social and material concept.

The development of the theoretical part evidences the gap between material and social prisms in their understanding of international society and hegemony. The theoretical review displays the existing confusion over the notions of primacy and hegemony, that sometimes are considered as synonyms. Even though the English School makes a clear distinction, there are presented as different phenomena although, at the end, they are sometimes complementary.

This lack of comprehensive approaches evidences the absence of fruitful dialogue between social and materialist research projects. As these project evidences, approaching the materialist analysis within the broader understanding of structure that is simultaneously material and social contextualises better the data and empowers social analysis dialoguing directly with the main materialist understandings.

As Pu rightly expresses, “the gap between material power and ideational power constitutes a major disequilibrium in the international system, and this disequilibrium drives the major international political change” (Pu, 2012: 353). It is in this gap precisely what this distinctive approach aims to shorten.

The source of conflict under hegemonic leadership is the tension between the real distribution of material power and the hierarchical hegemonic international system

Even though theories attribute conflict in the international system to different reasons, the lack of a notion paying attention to material and social variables addresses only partially this issue. The different transformations that take place on the social and material structures translate in different ways; distribution of material power, for instance, changes more rapidly but social changes in the hegemonic international society are more profound but also require longer periods of time.

The hierarchical hegemonic system was born under a certain distribution of power in which the state’s primacy has no challenge. This system, once it becomes more and more operationalised though instruments such as alliances, socialisation and legitimation practices and institutions, orders a hierarchy of distribution of gains. As this distribution is locked by the social role of the hegemon, it automatizes and maintains nearly stable over time. More dynamic states rise in this distribution of power, especially in economic terms, while its status in the social hierarchy does not match its new material
position. It does not only involve questions of status, identities or responsibilities, but also involvement on the decision-making processes and a better position on the hierarchy of the distribution of gains. The neglect to accommodate its rising challenger constitutes, under this view, the worst scenario for the hegemon, as the rising state will push for overcoming that hierarchy once the gains of doing it overcome the costs.

*China’s rise on the material power structure suggests future parity scenario. Meantime, China is taking advantage of the material development to develop internally and to expand its influence internationally.*

In economic terms, China’s is taking advantage of its surplus on two different realms. Internally, the Chinese government is trying to cut the gaps between country and urban zones, as well as reducing poverty and fostering a strong middle class. Even though in per capita term China is still a poor country, its advance in the last three decades show a huge potential of internal development, as well as a prospective global economic leadership.

Moreover, China is also devoting its new resources to produce attractiveness to the countries in development, as well as to several neoliberal elites on its defence of globalisation. Through institutions and its involvement on special responsibilities as a responsible state, China is developing an alternative that, even though nowadays is not as clearly articulated as the United States’, has the potential to reunite around progressively more actors of international society. However, important shadows still prevail, especially regarding the authoritarian nature of the Chinese governments, as well as the lack of liberties and protection of human rights.

*The United States is showing signs of recovery in the material and social realms, although it is facing a need of accommodation of China due to its rise.*

Even though one of the main drivers of these analysis was the perception of the decline of the United States hegemony both in material and social terms, the practical analysis shows a more moderate scenario. In material terms, especially in the economic sphere, the United States has recovered after the 2008 crisis and has reinforced its bases of growth, while China is still growing in more dynamic and impressive terms. However, the hegemon has shown an important ability to rejuvenate and spur its economy, even though in periods of crisis the maturity of its economy is more evident. It maintains its primacy after the crisis, but this event has pushed for a more bilateral management of economic, financial and security issues, not only to share the cost, but also to have a broader consensus on the measures assumed.

As the 2003 and 2008 events highlighted, the hegemon is not immune to material and social constraints. However, these processes can be reverted, both through a material recalibration or a reconciliation of its practices and interests with the expectations of other actors. Precisely, this last strategy was the one chosen by the United States that took advantage of the change of government in 2009 to transform itself into a hegemon committed to multilateralism and global agreements.
China’s identity as a rising power is performing a rightful resistance strategy that tries to accommodate and contest within the U.S institution of hegemony. However, it is simultaneously building and alternative model around its hierarchical leadership.

Even though China is usually portrayed as the confronting model towards the hegemonic leader, its involvement in the current institution of hegemony is highly active. The accommodation of the secondary hegemonic institutions led by the United States has been quite relevant in the last ten years, to the extent that China is, in some of them, considered as a status quo power within them. However, simultaneously, China is building several institutional projects with two main purposes. The first is to spread its influence and improve its modest legitimacy record, especially among its neighbouring states. Institutions devoted to regional developments such as the AIIB as well as the project of the OBOR improve the cooperative engagement while, at the same time, open new markets for the Chinese public and private investment.

Secondly, China aims to push Western leded institutions to a gradual disempowerment or, in other words, to a growing diffusion of the institutional power among the new institutions. Within the Western leded institutions, China is tacitly accepting the structure of the regimes, but at present aims to transform the main principles that guide these institutions in an attempt to become a norm maker. In a difficult balance, China maintains what Schweller and Pu define as “rightful resistance” (Schweller and Pu, 2011: 42).

Definitely, the Chinese growing institutional practice permeates clearly the revisionist aims of China, through a path of peaceful rise that reunites the notions of responsible state and rising leader of developing countries. Until now, China has avoided any direct confrontation with the United States and has pushed accommodation to expand its gains on Western institution. China is aware that neither it can match United States material power yet, nor it has the societal support to do it. Nevertheless, through this rightful resistance process, it contributes to decentralise and contest the hegemonic institution while it continues to expand its material and social bases of power.

The changes in the material and social power distribution will lead to a more unstable and conflicting international society

The end of the Cold War inaugurated an era of growing stable relations among great powers, as well as an important consensus around the processes of globalisation and institutional participation. Even though this consensus seemed to be broken in 2003, the return to multilateralism dissipated this doubts. However, the changes on the distribution of power have created a growing decentralisation on economic and climate change governance that will continue to expand.

Moreover, materially, the militarisation of the Asia-Pacific is an issue of special concerns, not only due to its economic relevance but also of its growing role as energy reserves on a scenario of a scarcity of resources. As the interests of China expand, there will enter on a growing conflict with the hegemon’s, and it is possible to inaugurate an era of less cooperative and more confronting bilateral relations. Definitively, the relations between both states will mark inherently the future stability of the international society. However, it still too early to foresaw a scenario of succession of hegemonies,
mainly because China has not yet articulated coherently and clearly its alternative proposal. For this purpose, the next four years under the Trump Administration will be vital to observe China’s response to a more belligerent hegemon, as rising defence budgets suggest. Moreover, how the international society reorders itself to face this new geopolitical reality will be crucial not only to the hegemonic legitimacy but also to the growing support to China’s processes of contestation.

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