

CHAPTER 3

US Hegemony in World Politics

CBSE Class 12 · Political Science ·
Contemporary World Politics · Chapter 3

CBSE · Political Science · Class 12

WHAT THIS CHAPTER DOES

A Explain the three senses of 'hegemony' with an example each.

B Trace US dominance from the 1991 Gulf War to the 2003 Iraq war.

Boards prep that builds confidence, not anxiety.

TODAY'S MISSION

Today's mission

1

Explain the three senses of 'hegemony' with an example each.

2

Trace US dominance from the 1991 Gulf War to the 2003 Iraq war.

3

List the constraints on American power + how hegemony can be overcome.

4

Score 6/7 marks on this chapter's slice.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Why this chapter matters

1

5-7 marks every CBSE board paper — the 'three senses' question is near-certain.

2

Explains today's world: the US-led order, the rise of China, the Quad, and India's strategic choices.

3

Builds directly on Ch 2 (end of bipolarity) — the unipolar moment is the Soviet collapse's sequel.

TOPIC

A

How US hegemony began

THEOREM · LOAD-BEARING RESULT

The unipolar moment — hegemony after 1991

“ After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States emerged as the **SOLE SUPERPOWER**. 'Hegemony' means the leadership or dominance of one state over the international system — a **UNIPOLAR** world with no peer rival.

STATEMENT

The US was a superpower from 1945, but only in a **BIPOLAR** contest with the USSR. With the USSR gone, the US had no equal — in military spending, technology, economic weight or cultural

WHY THIS MATTERS

- Hegemony is the natural sequel to the end of bipolarity (Ch 2)
- One pole of the old two-pole world simply vanished, leaving the other pole standing alone.

WATCH OUT FOR

NOTE Do NOT date US hegemony to 1945. 1945 = start of US **SUPERPOWER** status (shared with USSR). 1991 = start of US **HEGEMONY** (no rival).

TOPIC

B

The First Gulf War + the New World Order

WORKED EXAMPLE

The First Gulf War — Operation Desert Storm

- 1** TRIGGER: In August 1990, Iraq under Saddam Hussein **INVADED** and occupied **KUWAIT**, seizing its oilfields.
- 2** UN RESPONSE: The UN Security Council authorised the use of force to liberate Kuwait — a rare moment of great-power agreement after the Cold War.
- 3** THE COALITION: A US-led coalition of 34 **COUNTRIES** assembled under the UN mandate; the operation was **OPERATION DESERT STORM** (January-February 1991), commanded by US General Norman Schwarzkopf.
- 4** OUTCOME: Iraqi forces were swiftly driven out of Kuwait. The war showcased overwhelming US military-technological superiority (precision weapons, air power).
- 5** POLITICS OF THE WAR: The US bore only a fraction of the cost — Germany, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait paid much of it. The US actually made a financial 'profit' on the war.

TOPIC

C

The Clinton years — uncertain primacy

TOPIC

US primacy in the 1990s

DOMESTIC PRIORITIES

Through the 1990s, under President Bill Clinton (elected 1992, re-elected 1996), the United States enjoyed unmatched primacy but did not behave as an aggressive global policeman. Domestic and 'soft' issues dominated the American agenda — trade liberalisation, the expansion of democracy

LIMITED INTERVENTIONS

American military power in the 1990s was used selectively and often hesitantly. The US led NATO air strikes over Kosovo in 1999 to stop ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and intervened (unsuccessfully) in Somalia in 1993, where the 'Black Hawk Down' episode made

ECONOMY + GLOBALISATION

The 1990s were the decade in which American STRUCTURAL power over the world economy became most visible. The US dollar was the global reserve currency, the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank) and the new World Trade Organisation (founded 1995)

QUIET BUILD-UP OF RESENTMENT

Even as the US dominated benignly, resentment of American power accumulated in parts of the world — over US support for certain regimes, military bases in the Middle East, sanctions on Iraq, and perceived cultural domination. This undercurrent of

TOPIC

D

9/11 and the Global War on Terror

WORKED EXAMPLE

9/11 and the 'Global War on Terror'

- 1** 9/11: On 11 SEPTEMBER 2001, the Al-Qaeda network hijacked four aircraft, destroying the WORLD TRADE CENTER twin towers in New York and striking the PENTAGON near Washington — the most spectacular attack ever on US soil.
- 2** THE RESPONSE: President George W. Bush declared a 'GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR' and pursued suspects across the world, sometimes ignoring sovereignty, with secret detentions (Guantanamo Bay) and 'extraordinary renditions'.
- 3** AFGHANISTAN — OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM: In October 2001 the US launched Operation Enduring Freedom against the TALIBAN regime (which sheltered Al-Qaeda) and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, toppling the Taliban government.
- 4** IRAQ — OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM: On 19 MARCH 2003 the US led an invasion of IRAQ — Operation Iraqi Freedom — to oust Saddam Hussein, justified by claims (never substantiated) of 'weapons of mass destruction'.
- 5** NO UN MANDATE: Crucially, the 2003 Iraq war did NOT have explicit UN Security Council authorisation; the US assembled a 'COALITION OF THE WILLING' of over 40 countries instead.

TOPIC

E

The three senses of hegemony

TOPIC

Hegemony in three senses

HEGEMONY AS HARD / MILITARY POWER

In its first and most obvious sense, hegemony rests on overwhelming **MILITARY** superiority. The US spends more on defence than the next several great powers combined and can project force anywhere on earth — carrier battle groups, global bases, precision-guided

HEGEMONY AS STRUCTURAL POWER

The second sense is **STRUCTURAL** power — the dominant state's ability to shape the underlying **STRUCTURE** of the world economy. The US created and sustains the Bretton Woods system (IMF and World Bank, 1944), backed the World Trade Organisation (1995), and

HEGEMONY AS SOFT / CULTURAL POWER

The third sense is **SOFT** power — the ability to make others **WANT** what the hegemon wants through **ATTRACTION** rather than coercion (the idea associated with Joseph Nye). American culture, values, education and lifestyle pervade the globe: Hollywood films, popular music, blue

WHY ALL THREE MATTER TOGETHER

NCERT's central point is that American hegemony endures precisely because it combines all **THREE** senses — military reach, control of the economic structure, and cultural attraction — reinforcing one another. Hard power without legitimacy invites resistance; structural

TOPIC

F

Constraints on American power

TOPIC

What restrains the hegemon — from within

INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE US STATE

The first constraint comes from the AMERICAN CONSTITUTION itself. Power in the US is divided among three branches — the EXECUTIVE (the President), the LEGISLATURE (Congress) and the JUDICIARY — under a system of

OPEN SOCIETY AND A FREE PRESS

The second constraint is the OPEN NATURE of American SOCIETY and its FREE, critical MEDIA. The US has a deep tradition of individual liberty, suspicion of unchecked government, and a vigorous independent press protected by the First Amendment. When the

NATO AND THE COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES

The third constraint is the network of ALLIES and alliances on which the US itself depends. The only organisation that could even potentially moderate American power is the alliance of democratic states, of which NATO is the core. Because the US prefers to act WITH allies

CONSTRAINTS FROM WITHIN, NOT JUST RIVALS

The striking feature of NCERT's analysis is that the most effective limits on US power come not from external enemies but from WITHIN the hegemon's own system — its constitution, its open society, and its alliance commitments. Unlike the Cold War, when Soviet power

TOPIC

G

**How can
hegemony be
overcome?**

TOPIC

Strategies to limit US hegemony

THE BANDWAGON STRATEGY

BANDWAGONING means choosing to work WITHIN the hegemonic system rather than opposing it, in order to EXTRACT BENEFITS from it. Instead of confronting the dominant power and paying the cost of hostility, a state takes advantage of the opportunities the

THE 'HIDE' STRATEGY

The HIDE strategy means staying OUT OF THE WAY of the dominant power — keeping a low profile so as not to attract hostile attention. A state that neither challenges nor conspicuously allies with the hegemon avoids becoming a target while it quietly builds its own strength. China for a long period followed a version

THE BALANCE-OF-POWER STRATEGY

The classic answer to a dominant power is BALANCE OF POWER — building COUNTERVAILING COALITIONS so that no single state can dominate. On this view, a combination of rising and established powers — China, the European Union, Russia and India,

NON-STATE ACTORS AND GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Beyond states, NCERT highlights the long-term role of NON-STATE actors. MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS, NGOs, social movements, the international media and a transnational CIVIL SOCIETY can resist, expose and reshape hegemonic policies from within global society —

TOPIC

H

India and the United States

THEOREM · LOAD-BEARING RESULT

India's relationship with the US



India's relationship with the US shifted from **COLD-WAR DISTANCE** (India non-aligned, often closer to the USSR) to a deepening **PARTNERSHIP** after 1991, driven by economic reform, the IT revolution, and shared strategic interests.

STATEMENT

Several factors bind the two:
(1) ECONOMIC + TECHNOLOGICAL ties — India's software and IT-services industry is closely linked to US firms, and a large, successful **INDIAN**

WHY THIS MATTERS

- After the Soviet collapse, India lost its old superpower partner and embraced economic liberalisation (1991), making engagement with the world's largest economy and sole superpower both necessary and beneficial.

WATCH OUT FOR

NOTE NCERT presents **THREE** views in the Indian debate: (a) those who want India to **STAY DISTANT** from the US to preserve autonomy; (b) those who want **CLOSE ALIGNMENT** to gain technology and investment; (c) those who argue India should pragmatically **USE** the US-led order to advance its own rise. Quote all three views for full marks.

TOPIC

Meaning of hegemony

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** Hegemony just means having the biggest army.

✓ **CORRECT** Hegemony is **BROADER** than military might. NCERT gives **THREE** senses: (1) hegemony as **HARD/MILITARY** power (overwhelming military superiority); (2) hegemony as **STRUCTURAL** power (the dominant state shapes the global economic structure — Bretton Woods institutions, the IMF, World Bank, WTO, the dollar as reserve currency, sea-lane security); (3) hegemony as **SOFT/CULTURAL** power (the dominant state's ideas, culture, values and 'way of life' are seen as desirable — Hollywood, blue jeans, McDonald's, the American dream). Reducing it to 'big army' loses two-thirds of the answer.

TOPIC

When US hegemony began

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** US hegemony began right after World War II in 1945.

✓ **CORRECT** The US was a superpower from 1945, but it shared the stage with the USSR in a BIPOLAR Cold War. US HEGEMONY — a UNIPOLAR moment with NO peer rival — began only after the SOVIET COLLAPSE in 1991. The First Gulf War (1991) was its first major demonstration. Confusing 1945 (start of US superpower status) with 1991 (start of US hegemony) is a common error.

TOPIC

First Gulf War operation

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** The 1991 Gulf War was called Operation Iraqi Freedom.

✓ **CORRECT** The FIRST Gulf War (1991), launched to expel Iraq from Kuwait after Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion, was OPERATION DESERT STORM — a UN-authorized coalition of 34 countries led by the US. OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM is the SECOND, different war — the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, which did NOT have explicit UN Security Council authorisation. Do not swap the two.

TOPIC

War on Terror operations

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** Operation Enduring Freedom was the invasion of Iraq.

✓ **CORRECT** After 9/11 (11 September 2001), the US launched OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM in AFGHANISTAN (October 2001) against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The 2003 invasion of IRAQ was a SEPARATE operation, OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM. Enduring Freedom = Afghanistan 2001; Iraqi Freedom = Iraq 2003. NCERT treats them as two distinct phases of the 'Global War on Terror'.

TOPIC

Constraints on US power

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** There is nothing that can restrain US power; it is absolute.

✓ **CORRECT** NCERT identifies THREE internal/structural constraints on US power: (1) the INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE of the US state itself — the separation of powers (executive, legislature, judiciary) limits unilateral war-making; (2) the OPEN NATURE of US SOCIETY and its FREE PRESS — public scepticism and a free media create domestic checks on military adventures; (3) NATO and the US's reliance on ALLIES — the US itself prefers to act with allies and through alliances. These are constraints from WITHIN the hegemon's own system, not just from rivals.

TOPIC

Overcoming hegemony — neutrality

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** The only way to resist US hegemony is to declare neutrality and do nothing.

✓ **CORRECT** NCERT lists active STRATEGIES: (1) BANDWAGONING — extracting benefits by working WITHIN the hegemonic system rather than opposing it; (2) the 'HIDE' strategy — staying out of the hegemon's way to avoid attracting attention; (3) BALANCE OF POWER — building countervailing coalitions of states (e.g., a rising China + EU + India + Russia) to limit the hegemon; and crucially the long-term role of NON-STATE actors — MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS, NGOs, social movements and a transnational civil society. Passive neutrality is NOT one of the strategies.

TOPIC

Soft power

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** Soft power means a weak, gentle foreign policy.

✓ **CORRECT** SOFT POWER is the ability to get others to WANT what you want through ATTRACTION rather than coercion — the appeal of a country's culture, values, education and lifestyle. American soft power (Hollywood films, blue jeans, fast food, universities, the 'American dream') makes US dominance acceptable and even desired. It is a SOURCE of strength, not weakness. The term contrasts with 'hard' (military/economic coercion) power.

TOPPER TEMPLATE · MARK-BY-MARK

5-mark: 'Explain the three senses in which the term hegemony is used.'

1 **DEFINE HEGEMONY + THE UNIPOLAR CONTEXT**

1 m

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the United States emerged as the SOLE SUPERPOWER in a UNIPOLAR world — a position of 'hegemony' meaning the leadership or dominance of one state over the international system. NCERT explains that hegemony operates in THREE distinct senses.

2 **HARD POWER + STRUCTURAL POWER**

2 m

(1) HEGEMONY AS HARD / MILITARY POWER: the US enjoys overwhelming military superiority — it spends more on defence than the next several powers combined, possesses unmatched force-projection (aircraft carriers, precision weapons), and demonstrated it in the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq war.
 (2) HEGEMONY AS STRUCTURAL POWER: the dominant state provides and shapes the global economic STRUCTURE — the Bretton Woods system, the IMF, World Bank and WTO, the US dollar as the world's reserve currency, and the US Navy securing the global sea-lanes of trade. The hegemon supplies 'global public goods' that everyone uses.

3 **SOFT POWER**

1 m

(3) HEGEMONY AS SOFT / CULTURAL POWER: the capacity to make others WANT what the hegemon wants through ATTRACTION rather than force — American culture, ideas and values pervade the world (Hollywood, blue jeans, fast food, the 'American dream', US universities). This 'manufacture of consent' makes US dominance appear natural and desirable.

4 **CONCLUSION**

1 m

Thus hegemony is far more than military might: it is a combination of HARD (military), STRUCTURAL (economic-institutional) and SOFT (cultural) power. The endurance of US hegemony rests on all three working together.

TOPPER TEMPLATE · MARK-BY-MARK

5-mark: 'Examine the constraints on the exercise of American power.'

1 SET UP — EVEN A HEGEMON IS CONSTRAINED

1 m

Although the US is the sole superpower, its power is NOT unlimited. NCERT identifies three structural constraints that operate largely from WITHIN the American system itself.

2 INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE + OPEN SOCIETY

2 m

(1) THE INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE US STATE: the American constitution divides power among the EXECUTIVE (President), the LEGISLATURE (Congress) and the JUDICIARY. This SEPARATION OF POWERS makes it hard for the President to use military power unilaterally and without limit; Congress controls funds and can question war policy. (2) THE OPEN NATURE OF AMERICAN SOCIETY AND ITS FREE PRESS: the US has a tradition of individual freedom, scepticism of state authority, and a FREE, critical MEDIA. Public opinion and a probing press act as a domestic check on long, costly or unjust military adventures.

3 NATO / ALLIES

1 m

(3) NATO AND THE COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES: the only organisation that could possibly moderate US power is the alliance of democratic states. The US itself relies heavily on its ALLIES and prefers to work through alliances like NATO; this dependence on partners and shared institutions tempers purely unilateral action.

4 CONCLUSION

1 m

Hence American power is checked from within — by its own constitutional structure, its open society and free press, and its reliance on allies — rather than only by external rivals. These internal constraints are a distinctive feature of US hegemony.

TOPPER TEMPLATE · MARK-BY-MARK

5-mark: 'How can US hegemony be overcome? Discuss the available strategies.'

- 1** **FRAME THE QUESTION**
1 m

Other states and non-state actors have several STRATEGIES to limit, resist or live with US hegemony, ranging from cooperation to balancing.
- 2** **BANDWAGON + HIDE**
2 m

(1) THE BANDWAGON STRATEGY: instead of opposing the hegemon, a state EXTRACTS BENEFITS by operating WITHIN the hegemonic system — taking advantage of the opportunities it creates (trade access, technology, investment). (2) THE 'HIDE' STRATEGY: a state STAYS OUT OF THE WAY of the dominant power — keeping a low profile so as not to attract the hegemon's hostile attention. China has at times pursued a version of this 'lie low and grow' approach.
- 3** **BALANCE OF POWER**
1 m

(3) THE BALANCE-OF-POWER STRATEGY: states build COUNTERVAILING COALITIONS — a grouping of powers (such as a rising China, the European Union, Russia, India) whose combined weight can check the hegemon and prevent it from acting without limit.
- 4** **NON-STATE ACTORS + CONCLUSION**
1 m

Beyond states, NCERT stresses NON-STATE ACTORS: MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS, NGOs, social movements, the media and a transnational CIVIL SOCIETY can resist and reshape hegemonic policies from within global society. In the long run, hegemony is restrained by this mix of bandwagoning, balancing and bottom-up civil-society pressure rather than by any single rival.

PYQ PATTERNS

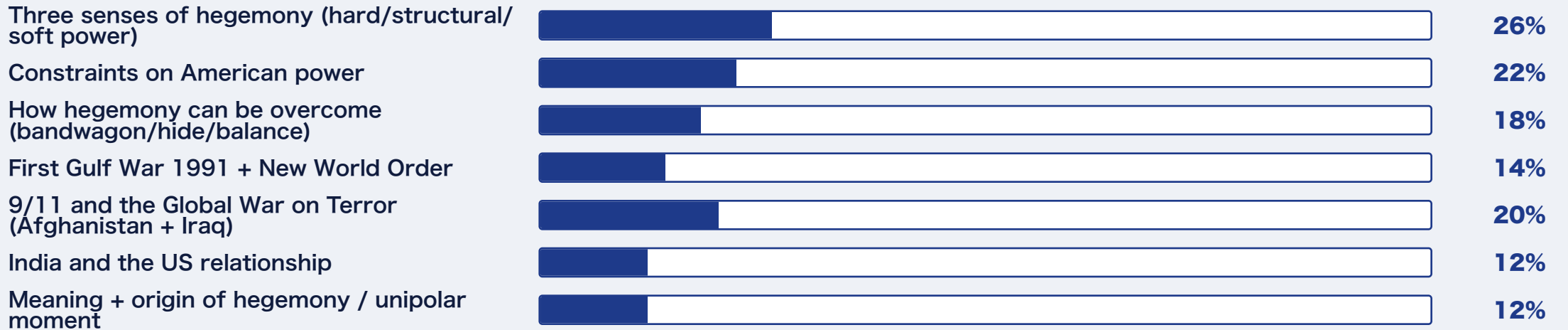
Top PYQ patterns to drill

#1	Explain the three senses / meanings in which the term 'hegemony' is used. (5 marks)	Annual
#2	Examine the constraints on the exercise of American power. (5 marks)	2018, 2020, 2023
#3	How can US hegemony be overcome? Discuss the strategies available to other states. (5 marks)	2019, 2022, 2024
#4	Describe the First Gulf War (1991). Why is it called a turning point? (3 marks)	Most years
#5	What was 9/11 and the 'Global War on Terror'? (3 marks)	2019, 2021, 2023

MARKS DISTRIBUTION

10-year marks distribution

10-YEAR PYQ MARKS DISTRIBUTION



RECAP · MEMORISE THESE

Recap

1 Hegemony — US = sole superpower from 1991. **THREE** senses: hard (military), structural (economy/institutions), soft (culture).

2 Key events — Gulf War 1991 (Desert Storm) → New World Order; 9/11 2001 → Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan); Iraqi Freedom (Iraq 2003, no UN mandate).

3 Limits + resistance — Constraints: US institutions + free press + NATO/allies. Overcome via bandwagon, hide, balance of power, and civil society/MNCs.

WHAT'S NEXT

What's next

- Chapter 4 — Alternative Centres of Power (EU, ASEAN, the rise of China).
- Sit the 15-MCQ Quick Drill.
- Then the full Board-Pattern Paper — 25 marks.

You've mastered US hegemony.

Three senses, the operations, the constraints — now prove it.

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