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Transformation in the Hegemonic Logic of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Persian Gulf: From the Unipolar Order to Multipolar Challenges (1990–2021)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of the hegemonic logic underlying United States foreign policy in the Persian Gulf region from the early 1990s to 2021. The primary focus of the study is the process of transition from the unipolar order that emerged following the end of the Cold War to the complex and increasingly multipolar framework characterizing recent years. Drawing upon major international relations theories, including hegemonic stability theory and offensive realism, the article analyzes shifts in U.S. policy orientations and investigates the role of domestic, regional, and international factors in redefining Washington's strategic approaches. The research method is based on qualitative analysis of documentary and scholarly sources. Four key stages in the transformation of American hegemonic logic are examined: consolidation of the unipolar order, redefinition of threats after the September 11 attacks, emergence of signs indicating the erosion of unipolarity, and the beginning of a multilateral engagement trajectory. The findings indicate that U.S. foreign policy in the Persian Gulf has gradually shifted from direct interventionism toward interactive strategies, indirect instruments of influence, and a reconfiguration of regional roles, developments that have had significant implications for the United States' strategic position and regional order-building processes.

Keywords: *Hegemony; U.S. Foreign Policy; Persian Gulf; Unipolar Order; Multipolarity; Geopolitical Transition; International Relations.*

Introduction

The Persian Gulf region, due to its geostrategic location, vast energy resources, and central role in global energy security, has consistently remained at the center of attention for major powers. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States utilized the emerging power vacuum in the international system to consolidate a unipolar global structure. Within this context, the Persian Gulf—one of the world's most sensitive geopolitical regions—became a principal arena for the exercise of American hegemony. Extensive military presence, direct interventions, and support for aligned governments constituted key components of Washington's strategy to control regional developments (1).



With the end of the Cold War, the United States assumed the position of an unrivaled global power and succeeded in reorganizing the international order in line with its interests through international institutions, economic instruments, and security diplomacy. In the Persian Gulf, this order was reinforced through the establishment of military bases, the conclusion of defense agreements, and the management of regional crises. Nevertheless, from the second decade of the twenty-first century onward, signs of instability in the unipolar structure began to emerge, including rising military expenditures, declining international legitimacy, and the emergence of competing actors such as China, Russia, and Iran (2).

The objective of this article is to analyze the transformation of the hegemonic logic underlying U.S. foreign policy in the Persian Gulf during the period 1990–2021. By focusing on the transition from a unipolar order toward a multipolar condition, the study seeks to clarify the strategic, security, and diplomatic dimensions of this transformation. The main research questions are as follows:

- How has the hegemonic logic of the United States in the Persian Gulf shifted from a unipolar structure toward a multipolar configuration?
- What domestic and international factors have contributed to this transformation?
- How have the instruments of American dominance in the region evolved?
- What strategic consequences has this transformation produced for the United States and regional actors?

Research Method

The research method of this article is qualitative and based on documentary and theoretical analysis. Data were extracted from Persian and English academic sources, strategic reports, and scholarly articles. The innovation of the study lies in integrating classical international relations theories with regional developments in the Persian Gulf and presenting an analytical framework for understanding the transition from dominance to interaction in U.S. foreign policy. Furthermore, the article seeks to move beyond superficial interpretations by examining structural and discursive layers involved in the transformation of hegemonic logic.

Theoretical Framework

The Concept of Hegemony in International Relations Theories

The concept of hegemony in international relations studies has long been regarded as one of the most fundamental and multidimensional theoretical concepts. In its simplest definition, hegemony refers to a condition in which a dominant power not only prevails militarily and economically but also shapes behavioral rules, institutional arrangements, and international discourses. Unlike mere domination, hegemonic authority is accompanied by a degree of implicit acceptance by other actors, granting the resulting order a form of relative legitimacy despite inherent inequalities (3).

In recent decades, the notion of “smart hegemony” has emerged as a reinterpretation of classical hegemonic theory. This approach emphasizes the integration of hard and soft power and the capacity to reproduce civilizational and identity-based discourses. Within this framework, hegemony depends not solely on military and economic tools but also on media networks, international institutions, and cultural mechanisms (3).

Hegemonic Stability Theory and Offensive Realism

Hegemonic Stability Theory, rooted in liberal analytical traditions, assumes that the existence of a superior power in the international system can generate relative stability because such a power provides public goods, manages crises, and regulates the rules of interaction. From this perspective, the United States, following the Cold War, attempted to stabilize the global order in accordance with its strategic interests by leveraging its superior position (4).

In contrast, offensive realism—emerging from the broader realist tradition—argues that major powers continuously seek to expand influence and prevent the rise of potential rivals. This perspective interprets U.S. behavior in the Persian Gulf as an effort to preserve strategic superiority and prevent shifts in the balance of power. Particularly during periods of heightened regional or global threats, American interventionist policies can be understood within this theoretical framework (1).

The Concept of Global Order Transition: From Unipolarity to Multipolarity

Structural transformations within the international system over the past two decades indicate a gradual transition from a unipolar order toward a multipolar configuration. In a unipolar order, a single dominant power plays the decisive role in global policymaking, while other actors occupy subordinate positions. In contrast, a multipolar order involves multiple powers with varying capabilities participating in decision-making and order-building processes. This transition is observable not only globally but also in sensitive regions such as the Persian Gulf, where actors including China, Russia, Iran, and several Arab states have sought to exercise greater strategic autonomy (2).

Within this framework, the shift from unipolarity to multipolarity does not necessarily signify the absolute decline of U.S. power; rather, it reflects increased complexity in global order formation and the necessity of redefining foreign policy roles and instruments. This transformation requires a change in hegemonic logic, moving away from direct domination toward multilayered interaction and cooperative engagement (5).

Application of Theories to the Analysis of U.S. Behavior in the Persian Gulf

Drawing upon the above theoretical perspectives, U.S. behavior in the Persian Gulf can be analyzed through four analytical stages:

1. The post–Cold War consolidation of hegemony, characterized by extensive military presence, support for aligned regimes, and management of regional crises.
2. The post–September 11 redefinition of threats, leading to expanded direct interventions, regime-change strategies, and new security doctrines.
3. The phase of unipolar instability, during which the United States encountered legitimacy challenges, rising costs, and the emergence of rival powers.
4. The transition toward interaction, in which Washington increasingly relies on non-military instruments, limited diplomacy, and media-based narrative construction rather than direct intervention.

This trajectory reflects a transformation in the logic of U.S. foreign policy from dominance-oriented behavior toward a multilayered and participatory management approach requiring the redefinition of roles and instruments within the evolving regional order (1, 3).

Consolidation of the Unipolar Order in the 1990s

The End of the Cold War and the Emergence of the United States as the Uncontested Power

The fundamental transformation in the structure of the international system following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the beginning of a period in which the United States, lacking a structural rival, assumed the position of dominant global power. This transformation not only ended bipolar rivalry but also facilitated the emergence of a unipolar order in which Washington was able to redefine behavioral norms, international institutions, and global policymaking patterns in accordance with its interests (4).

During this period, the United States sought to institutionalize a form of “liberal global order” by capitalizing on its military, economic, technological, and media superiority. Within this order, principles such as free markets, liberal democracy, and multilateral cooperation were articulated under American leadership. Although outwardly grounded in international norms, this system largely reflected U.S. strategic interests, including energy security, control of global trade, and management of regional crises (3).

Accordingly, the Persian Gulf acquired exceptional importance within American global strategy. The global economy’s dependence on the region’s energy resources, its geostrategic position linking East and West, and the presence of fragile and crisis-prone states encouraged Washington to institutionalize its regional presence structurally. The 1991 military operation against Iraq, the establishment of military bases in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar, and the signing of defense agreements formed central components of U.S. efforts to consolidate its position in the Persian Gulf (5).

From a theoretical standpoint, this period can be interpreted as an illustration of Hegemonic Stability Theory, as the United States attempted to preserve relative stability in the international system through security provision, crisis management, and institutional leadership. Nevertheless, this stability was less the product of global consensus than the result of structural power and the capacity for unilateral action (1).

Containment Policies and Regional Management

During the 1990s, United States foreign policy in the Persian Gulf was structured around two principal pillars: first, the containment of challenging regional actors; and second, the management of regional crises aimed at preserving a favorable stability. Within the framework of the post–Cold War unipolar order, these strategies functioned as instruments for consolidating American hegemonic authority in the region.

One of the most prominent manifestations of containment policy was the “Dual Containment” strategy introduced by the administration of President Bill Clinton in 1994. Unlike earlier approaches that emphasized balancing Iran and Iraq against one another, this strategy sought simultaneously to restrict the influence of both states. The primary objective was to prevent the emergence of independent regional powers capable of challenging the U.S.-preferred regional order (4). Within this framework, economic sanctions against Iran, diplomatic pressure on Iraq, and the strengthening of regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel were employed as operational instruments.

Alongside containment, the United States actively engaged in regional crisis management. The most significant example was the response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which resulted in a large-scale military operation known as “Desert Storm.” This operation not only forced Iraqi withdrawal but also reinforced the United States’ position as the guarantor of regional security (5). Subsequently, Washington sought to preserve strategic control

over the region through the deployment of military forces in Arab states, the establishment of no-fly zones over Iraq, and continuous monitoring of regional developments.

From a theoretical perspective, these policies can be interpreted through the lens of offensive realism, as the United States, perceiving potential threats from regional actors, adopted strategies of limitation and intervention rather than balancing or cooperative engagement. The objective was to prevent the rise of rival powers and maintain exclusive influence over regional security decision-making (1).

In this context, the United States also attempted to institutionalize a managed regional order by strengthening security organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and forming temporary military coalitions. Although this order appeared cooperative, it was largely shaped under American leadership and supervision, thereby constraining the strategic autonomy of regional states (3).

Instruments of Dominance: International Institutions, the Dollar, and Security Diplomacy

During the 1990s, the United States did not rely solely on military power to consolidate its hegemonic position in the international system; rather, it employed a set of structural and institutional instruments operating through indirect dominance. These tools included international institutions, the dollar-based global financial system, and extensive security diplomacy, which together enabled the projection of both hard and soft power in strategically sensitive regions, particularly the Persian Gulf.

The first instrument consisted of international institutions established after World War II with strong American support. Following the Cold War, these institutions increasingly functioned as mechanisms for legitimizing U.S. policies. Organizations such as the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization—through decision-making structures influenced by major powers—provided channels for American influence in security, economic, and legal domains. In many cases, these institutions operated less as neutral actors and more as stabilizers of a U.S.-preferred international order (3, 4).

The second instrument was the dollar-centered global financial system. Following the Bretton Woods arrangements and the consolidation of the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency, Washington gained the ability to use economic sanctions as a powerful foreign policy tool by controlling global financial flows. During the 1990s, extensive sanctions imposed on Iran and Iraq relied heavily on this financial architecture. The dependence of global trade on the dollar enabled the United States to influence regional actors by exerting pressure on banks, corporations, and governments (5).

The third instrument was security diplomacy, manifested through military coalitions, defense agreements, and the establishment of military bases across Arab states. During this period, the United States strengthened military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, thereby restructuring the regional security architecture in accordance with its strategic interests. This diplomacy was designed not only to confront regional threats but also to prevent the strategic penetration of competing powers such as Russia and China (1).

The Role of the Persian Gulf in Consolidating the Unipolar Order

During the 1990s, the Persian Gulf played a decisive role in consolidating the global unipolar order as one of the central arenas of U.S. foreign policy strategy. Owing to its geostrategic location, vast energy reserves, and the fragility of domestic political structures within many Arab states, the region provided a favorable environment for the

projection of American hegemony. The Persian Gulf functioned not only as a cornerstone of global energy security but also as a laboratory for Washington's order-building policies (4).

The global economy's heavy dependence on the region's oil and gas resources allowed the United States to assume a regulatory role in global markets by controlling energy transportation routes. The establishment of military bases in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, together with bilateral defense agreements, formed part of a long-term structural strategy aimed at institutionalizing American presence in the region. These measures ensured the security of regional allies while enabling rapid responses to potential threats posed by actors such as Iran and Iraq (1).

From an economic standpoint, the Persian Gulf operated as a major hub of capital circulation and energy trade within a global financial order dominated by the U.S. dollar. By leveraging this dependence, Washington employed economic sanctions as an instrument of pressure against opposing actors. Extensive sanctions imposed on Iran and Iraq during the 1990s exemplified policies intended to contain regional powers and preserve U.S. dominance in regional security decision-making (5).

Diplomatically, the Persian Gulf became a platform for constructing regional alliances. Through support for the Gulf Cooperation Council, the United States sought to foster a form of collective security among Arab states that effectively operated under American leadership. This diplomatic strategy aimed to prevent regional alignment with rival powers such as Russia and China while maintaining a favorable balance against Iran (3).

From a theoretical perspective, the role of the Persian Gulf in consolidating the unipolar order can be interpreted through Hegemonic Stability Theory, as the United States attempted to stabilize the region through energy security provision, crisis management, and institutional security-building. Although framed as cooperative governance, this order largely reflected Washington's strategic interests and limited the independent strategic agency of regional states (4).

The September 11 Turning Point and the Redefinition of Hegemonic Logic

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, represent a critical turning point in the transformation of the hegemonic logic of U.S. foreign policy. The event fundamentally reshaped American perceptions of security threats, led to the reorganization of interventionist strategies, generated new strategic doctrines, and altered Washington's interaction with the Persian Gulf region. During this period, the hegemonic logic of the United States shifted from "order management" toward "order reconstruction," producing wide-ranging regional consequences.

Transformation in Threat Perception: Terrorism, Fundamentalism, and Iran

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 marked a decisive transformation in the strategic perception of security threats within U.S. policymaking. Prior to this event, threats were largely defined in terms of rival states, regional competition, and geopolitical challenges. Afterward, American strategic attention shifted toward transnational threats, non-state networks, and ideological movements, fundamentally altering the hegemonic logic of U.S. foreign policy (4).

Within this redefinition, international terrorism—particularly networks such as al-Qaeda—was framed as an existential threat to U.S. national security. This perception facilitated the emergence of new doctrines such as "preemptive war" and "extraterritorial security," granting the United States justification to confront perceived threats beyond its territorial borders (5).

Alongside terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism was increasingly conceptualized as an ideological and cultural threat within U.S. security discourse. Consequently, Washington pursued not only military responses but also political and cultural restructuring initiatives in Muslim-majority countries, exemplified by projects such as the “Greater Middle East Initiative” (3).

Iran also assumed a prominent position within this redefined threat framework. Although the Islamic Republic of Iran was not involved in the September 11 attacks, its opposition to U.S. military presence, support for resistance movements, and progress in its nuclear program led to its designation as a major regional threat. This perception contributed to intensified economic sanctions, increased diplomatic pressure, and strengthened anti-Iranian alliances in the Persian Gulf (1).

From a theoretical standpoint, this transformation can be interpreted through the concept of discursive securitization, whereby threats are constructed not solely through objective realities but also through discursive representations. Within this framework, terrorism, fundamentalism, and Iran were reconstructed as a “threatening Other” in American security discourse to legitimize military interventions and regional order reconstruction (4).

Expansion of Military Interventions and Regime Change

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, U.S. foreign policy entered a new phase in which direct military interventions were increasingly employed as the primary instrument for redefining the regional order. This transformation stemmed from a new security doctrine that framed threats not only in terms of hostile states but also as terrorist networks, fundamentalist movements, and “rogue states” (4).

Within this framework, two large-scale military interventions were undertaken in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Their objectives extended beyond responding to immediate security threats to restructuring the internal political orders of these states. The invasion of Afghanistan began as an effort to suppress al-Qaeda and the Taliban, but it rapidly evolved into a state-building project aimed at reconstructing government institutions, security apparatuses, and social structures. In Iraq, the Ba’athist regime was overthrown under the pretext of weapons of mass destruction and alleged links to terrorism, and a project to establish a Western-aligned democratic government was initiated (5).

In this period, “regime change” emerged as a key instrument of U.S. foreign policy. Unlike earlier phases in which interventions were largely oriented toward containment or balancing, the 2000s were marked by attempts to replace challenging governments with new political structures. This approach relied on military power, coercive diplomacy, and media-driven narrative construction (3).

In the Persian Gulf, these policies generated far-reaching consequences. On the one hand, they weakened state structures in Iraq and intensified instability; on the other, they facilitated the expansion of Iranian influence in the post-Ba’ath environment and contributed to the emergence of extremist groups such as ISIS. Moreover, U.S. military interventions heightened regional public sensitivity toward foreign presence and reduced Washington’s legitimacy among Arab and Islamic societies (1).

From a theoretical standpoint, this stage can be interpreted as a transition from “managed hegemony” to “reconstructionist hegemony,” meaning that the United States sought not merely to preserve the existing order but to build a new order based on liberal values, democratic structures, and security dependencies. However, failures to achieve long-term objectives, rising human and financial costs, and regional resistance meant that this logic encountered serious challenges in subsequent decades (2, 4).

Emergence of New Doctrines: Preemptive War and the Greater Middle East

Developments following the September 11, 2001 attacks produced a fundamental redefinition of the strategic logic of U.S. foreign policy. In this period, Washington moved beyond traditional deterrence and containment models toward doctrines emphasizing active interventionism, regional order reconstruction, and the diffusion of liberal values. Two prominent doctrines in this context were “preemptive war” and the “Greater Middle East” initiative, both of which directly shaped U.S. policies in the Persian Gulf.

The first doctrine, “preemptive war,” was formally articulated in the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy. It was grounded in the principle that the United States had the right to act militarily before a threat became imminent, thereby neutralizing it in advance. This approach was designed to confront transnational threats such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and “rogue states” (4). The 2003 invasion of Iraq was the first major operational test of this doctrine, conducted with the aim of removing the Ba’ath regime and preventing the escalation of perceived security threats.

The second doctrine was the “Greater Middle East” plan, advanced by the U.S. government in 2004. This initiative aimed at political, economic, and cultural restructuring across Muslim-majority countries in the region, emphasizing democratization, economic reform, civil society strengthening, and combating fundamentalism. In effect, the doctrine sought to transform domestic structures in regional states in order to reduce security threats and increase alignment with the liberal global order (5).

However, both doctrines faced significant practical challenges. Preemptive war lost legitimacy due to the absence of international consensus, high human and financial costs, and unintended consequences such as the rise of extremist groups. The Greater Middle East initiative also failed to achieve its objectives due to cultural resistance, weak domestic institutions, and misreadings of local contexts (1).

In the Persian Gulf, these doctrines contributed to expanded U.S. military presence, intensified regional rivalries, and greater instability. Regional public opinion also became increasingly skeptical of Washington’s underlying motives, contributing to a decline in U.S. legitimacy among Arab and Islamic societies (2).

From a theoretical perspective, these doctrines can be interpreted as efforts to reconstruct hegemonic logic under new conditions—conditions in which security threats were no longer primarily classical-state in form but increasingly networked, transnational, and ideological. In such a context, the United States attempted to combine hard and soft power to shape a new regional order in the Persian Gulf, though this project encountered deep structural and cultural resistance (3).

Security and Political Consequences for the Region

The transformations triggered by September 11 and the interventionist strategies of the United States in subsequent decades produced extensive consequences for the security and political structures of the Persian Gulf region. These effects occurred at both the level of states and formal institutions and the level of society and public opinion, generating fundamental shifts that are essential for analyzing U.S. hegemonic logic.

In the security domain, U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq weakened state structures, expanded power vacuums, and facilitated the rise of non-state actors. In Iraq, the collapse of the Ba’ath regime and the failure to establish a stable political order created conditions conducive to the emergence of extremist groups such as ISIS, which became a transnational threat to the broader region (2). Additionally, intensified regional competition—

particularly involving Iran and Saudi Arabia—heightened geopolitical tensions and increased security costs for regional governments (1).

Politically, extensive U.S. military presence and support for certain Arab regimes generated a form of security dependency that constrained the strategic autonomy of regional states. Over time, this dependency encountered growing social dissatisfaction and rising domestic pressures, especially in states grappling with legitimacy crises, entrenched corruption, and ethnic or sectarian divisions (5).

Regional public opinion also evolved in response to U.S. policies. During the 1990s, the United States was often perceived as a guarantor of regional security; however, after September 11—particularly following the occupation of Iraq—critical views toward Washington’s real objectives expanded significantly. Regional media, through extensive coverage of the human costs of war, played a major role in shaping this shift (3).

From a theoretical perspective, these outcomes can be understood as indicators of “hegemonic erosion,” meaning that a hegemonic power, despite possessing both hard and soft instruments, faces challenges in sustaining legitimacy and effectiveness. In the Persian Gulf, such erosion is visible through rising instability, declining public trust, and the growing prominence of alternative powers such as China and Russia (4).

Signs of the Erosion of the Unipolar Order (2010–2021)

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, signs of erosion and instability within the U.S.-led unipolar order gradually became more apparent. These indicators—both structural and discursive—reflected a decline in America’s capacity to sustain its hegemonic position. The Persian Gulf, as a central arena of U.S. power projection, provided a critical setting in which these dynamics became visible.

Rising Costs of U.S. Military Presence

Between 2010 and 2021, one of the most significant indicators of instability in the global unipolar order was the rising cost of U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf region. These costs—financial, human, strategic, and political—placed increasing pressure on Washington’s decision-making structures. The prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, particularly after 2010, not only imposed massive direct financial burdens but also contributed to the erosion of U.S. military operational capacity and reduced domestic support for foreign interventions (6).

Recent studies indicate that U.S. military expenditures in the Persian Gulf peaked during the George W. Bush administration, while subsequent administrations—especially Barack Obama and Donald Trump—sought to reduce these costs by “smartening” U.S. presence. This “smartening” included reducing combat forces, increasing reliance on surveillance and monitoring technologies, and strengthening security cooperation with Arab partners (6).

However, even during periods of attempted cost reduction, U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf continued to face financial, political, and security challenges. Popular protests in Iraq and Afghanistan, increased attacks on U.S. bases, and the growth of anti-American sentiment across the region contributed to rising indirect costs of military deployment.

From a strategic perspective, the increased costs of U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf prompted reconsideration of interventionist logic. In the late 2010s, U.S. policymakers increasingly moved toward reducing direct military commitments and expanding the role of regional allies. This shift signaled the erosion of American hegemonic capacity and a gradual transition toward a multipolar order (5).

Declining International Legitimacy and Regional Protests

During the 2010s, the international legitimacy of the United States—particularly in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf—faced serious challenges. This decline in legitimacy was a direct outcome of extensive military interventions, unilateral policy orientations, and failures to deliver on promises of political and security reconstruction. Regional public opinion, which during the 1990s often perceived the United States as a guarantor of stability, adopted a more critical stance toward foreign presence after the Iraq War and the post–September 11 developments (4).

In Iraq, popular protests against corruption, governmental ineffectiveness, and foreign influence—especially in 2019 and 2020—demonstrated that U.S. presence had not produced stability but instead contributed to the intensification of internal crises. In Bahrain as well, the 2011 protests—suppressed with Saudi military support and U.S. silence—undermined Washington’s credibility among Shi’a groups and human rights activists (1).

At the international level, U.S. European allies also expressed concern regarding Washington’s unilateralism, particularly during the Trump presidency. The U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA) in 2018 without coordination with European partners exemplified such behavior and weakened international confidence in U.S. leadership (5).

Regional media also played a significant role in representing this decline in legitimacy. Networks such as Al Jazeera, Al Mayadeen, and Press TV—by highlighting the human consequences of wars, structural corruption, and failures of reconstruction—contributed to shaping a critical discourse toward U.S. hegemony (3). By foregrounding indigenous narratives and popular resistance, these media outlets contributed to the erosion of America’s image in regional public opinion.

From a theoretical standpoint, declining international legitimacy can be interpreted as a sign of a “hegemony crisis,” in which the dominant power, despite possessing hard-power instruments, fails to maintain soft legitimacy. In the Persian Gulf, this crisis manifested through popular protests, political fragmentation, and an increasing inclination to cooperate with alternative powers such as China and Russia (4).

The Rise of Rival Powers: China, Russia, and Iran

Between 2010 and 2021, one of the most important indicators of the erosion of the global unipolar order was the emergence and consolidation of rival powers at both regional and international levels. By exploiting strategic vacuums produced by a relative decline in U.S. focus on the Persian Gulf, these actors strengthened their positions in regional order-making. China, Russia, and Iran—each through distinct instruments and strategic logics—became major challengers to the U.S.-centered order.

China, by prioritizing economic diplomacy and expanding the Belt and Road Initiative, increased its influence across Arab states and West Asia. Infrastructure investment, energy contracts, and technological cooperation enabled Beijing to be recognized as a consequential actor in regional equations. Unlike the United States, which has often relied on military instruments, China leveraged economic and soft power to consolidate its position without direct confrontation (5).

Russia also expanded its military and diplomatic role by capitalizing on geopolitical opportunities—especially following the Syria crisis. Its military intervention in Syria in 2015, support for the Assad government, and strengthening of relations with Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt illustrated Moscow’s effort

to reassert its regional role. This presence reduced the extent to which the United States could operate as the sole security actor in the region (4).

Iran, as a regional power with geopolitical, cultural, and ideological capacities, also played a significant role in balancing against U.S. hegemony. The development of the “axis of resistance,” influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, and the strengthening of missile and defense capabilities positioned Tehran as an independent and influential actor in regional dynamics. This role became more pronounced after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, contributing to intensified regional competition (1).

From a theoretical perspective, the rise of these powers can be understood as an indicator of transition toward a multipolar order—an order in which decision-making monopolies shift from a single dominant power to a diverse set of actors. In the Persian Gulf, this shift increased policy complexity, reduced the effectiveness of unilateral interventions, and required a redefinition of the U.S. role (3).

Shifts in Public Opinion and Regional Media

From 2010 to 2021, public opinion and regional media in the Persian Gulf underwent profound transformations that directly affected the legitimacy and effectiveness of the U.S.-led unipolar order. These shifts not only reflected changing perceptions of the U.S. role but also functioned as active drivers of Washington’s hegemonic erosion.

Public opinion across Arab states—particularly in Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia—adopted a more critical stance toward U.S. presence following experiences of wars, military interventions, and failures of political reconstruction. Popular protests in Iraq (2019–2020) and Bahrain (2011), often accompanied by anti-American slogans, indicated that the image of the United States as a “security guarantor” had increasingly been replaced by perceptions of it as a “source of instability” (1, 2).

Regional media also played a central role in representing this transformation. Networks such as Al Jazeera, Al Mayadeen, Al Alam, and Press TV—by focusing on the human costs of wars, structural corruption, and unmet democratic promises—helped shape a critical discourse toward U.S. hegemony. By amplifying indigenous narratives and popular resistance, these outlets contributed to the erosion of America’s public image in the region (5).

In addition, the spread of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram created new spaces for disseminating alternative narratives. Political activists, independent journalists, and grassroots groups used these platforms to criticize U.S. policies, expose the consequences of foreign interventions, and strengthen independence-oriented discourses. As a result, Western mainstream media’s control over dominant narratives was increasingly challenged (3).

From a theoretical standpoint, these transformations in public opinion and media can be understood as part of a “hegemonic legitimacy crisis,” in which the dominant power—despite possessing hard-power tools—fails to sustain a favorable image among target societies. In the Persian Gulf, this crisis created conditions more conducive to the acceptance of alternative powers such as China and Russia and generated discursive challenges to the unipolar order (4).

Challenges of Multipolarity in the Persian Gulf

The transition from a unipolar order to multipolarity in the Persian Gulf, while signaling a reduction in U.S. power monopoly, does not necessarily imply the achievement of stability or durable cooperation. Rather, this transition is

accompanied by structural, competitive, and discursive challenges that have made regional order-building increasingly complex.

Competition Among Extra-Regional Powers for Influence

Under conditions of transition from unipolarity to multipolarity, the Persian Gulf has become an arena of competition among extra-regional powers. The United States, China, and Russia—each operating according to distinct strategic logics—seek to expand their influence in this region. This competition has not only complicated the regional security architecture but also produced increasingly multilayered foreign relations for Arab states.

Despite a relative reduction in direct military commitments in the 2020s, the United States continues to preserve its traditional role through military bases, arms sales, and security arrangements such as the Abraham Accords. By emphasizing countering Iran, safeguarding energy security, and supporting aligned regimes, Washington seeks to maintain its position in regional order-building (4).

In contrast, China has expanded its influence through a primarily economic and non-interventionist approach—especially via the Belt and Road Initiative, investment in port infrastructure, and long-term energy contracts. Increased trade ties with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as China’s diplomatic engagement in regional rapprochement efforts, illustrate Beijing’s growing geopolitical weight in the region (5).

Russia, too, has strengthened its military and diplomatic standing by exploiting strategic vacuums, particularly after the Syria crisis. Support for the Assad government, defense-system sales to Arab states, and flexible relations with diverse actors including Iran and Egypt have enabled Moscow to be perceived as a balancing actor vis-à-vis the United States (3).

This extra-regional competition has pushed Arab states toward more diversified foreign policies. For example, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have expanded economic cooperation with China and diplomatic engagement with Russia while maintaining security ties with the United States. Rather than producing stability, this pattern has increased the complexity of regional order-building (1).

From a theoretical perspective, competition among extra-regional powers can be interpreted as a form of “asymmetric multipolarity,” in which no single power is capable of enforcing full dominance and regional actors must balance among multiple poles. Although this reduces U.S. monopoly, it also increases the risks of instability and proxy competition (2).

The Relative Foreign-Policy Autonomy of Arab States

In recent decades—particularly since 2010—some Arab states of the Persian Gulf have sought to move away from a condition of complete dependence on extra-regional powers, especially the United States, and to pursue a more autonomous foreign policy. This shift constitutes part of the broader transition toward multipolarity in the region, in which local actors play a more active role in shaping security, economic, and diplomatic equations.

The United Arab Emirates has been among the pioneers of this trend. By expanding parallel relations with the United States, China, Russia, and even Iran, the UAE has demonstrated an intention to diversify its sources of power and reduce strategic dependency. The UAE’s participation in the Abraham Accords with Israel, its economic cooperation with China, and its mediation roles in certain regional disputes illustrate forms of this relative autonomy (5).

Qatar, too, has pursued a multidimensional foreign policy and has been able to play a mediating role in regional crises. Its support for engagement with the Taliban, close ties with Turkey and Iran, and resistance to Saudi pressure during the 2017 blockade crisis demonstrate Doha's efforts to preserve independent decision-making in international affairs (1).

Saudi Arabia has also, in recent years—particularly following reductions in U.S. military commitments—moved toward redefining its regional role. Direct talks with Iran, closer ties with China through energy agreements, and attempts to play a role in global crises such as the war in Ukraine reflect a shift in Riyadh's traditional dependency pattern on Washington (3).

From a theoretical standpoint, this relative autonomy can be interpreted through the lens of "active balancing," meaning that Arab states, rather than merely following a single hegemonic power, seek to increase bargaining capacity by diversifying external relations. While this approach enhances strategic flexibility, it also contributes to greater complexity in regional order-making (4).

The Weakening of U.S. Hegemonic Narratives

Within the framework of a unipolar order, the United States has consistently sought to consolidate its role as a security guarantor, promoter of democracy, and leader of global development through discursive narrative construction. Particularly after the Cold War, these narratives were reproduced through concepts such as the "liberal international order," "humanitarian intervention," and the "war on terror." However, from the 2010s onward, these narratives encountered serious challenges in the Persian Gulf, and U.S. discursive legitimacy gradually weakened.

The first factor behind this weakening was the contradiction between U.S. claims and its actual conduct in the region. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, justified as a response to weapons of mass destruction and a project of democratization, not only produced widespread instability but also contributed to the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS. In regional public opinion, this experience shifted the image of the United States from a "global reformer" to a "source of crisis" (4).

The second factor was the expansion of independent regional media that challenged official Western narratives. Networks such as Al Jazeera, Al Mayadeen, Al Alam, and Press TV, by focusing on human costs of wars, structural corruption, and reconstruction failures, contributed to the formation of a critical discourse toward U.S. hegemony. By amplifying indigenous narratives, these media outlets facilitated further erosion of the U.S. image in regional public opinion (5).

The third factor was the emergence of rival powers offering alternative narratives. China, emphasizing "win-win cooperation," and Russia, advancing a discourse of "restoring global balance," became attractive alternatives to the U.S. liberal narrative in segments of Arab and Islamic societies. These narratives were often received more positively in countries that had experienced direct U.S. interventions (3).

From a theoretical perspective, the weakening of U.S. hegemonic narratives can be analyzed as a "discursive legitimacy crisis," in which the dominant power—despite possessing hard-power instruments—fails to sustain a favorable image among target societies. In the Persian Gulf, this crisis created greater receptivity to alternative narratives and generated discursive challenges to the unipolar order (1).

Increasing Complexity in Regional Order-Building

The transition from a unipolar order to a multipolar configuration in the Persian Gulf has not only diversified actors and interests but has also made regional order-building increasingly complex. Under such conditions, consensus among extra-regional powers has become more difficult, while regional states face growing challenges in aligning their own interests and priorities.

First, the absence of effective regional institutions remains a major obstacle to the formation of a durable order. Despite its institutional capacities, the Gulf Cooperation Council has been unable to perform a cohesive role in crises such as the Qatar blockade (2017–2021), the Yemen war, and intra-member disputes. This institutional weakness has pushed states to act independently according to national interests rather than within a collective security framework (4).

Second, ideological and sectarian rivalries among regional actors—particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia—have ensured that order-building initiatives face political and cultural resistance. These rivalries are reflected not only at the state level but also across societies and media environments, thereby undermining trust formation (1).

Third, interventions by extra-regional powers with divergent interests have multilayered the region's security architecture. The United States, China, and Russia each seek to expand influence through distinct logics, forcing Arab states into balancing among them. As a result, no single power can impose a comprehensive order, leaving the region in a condition of "unstable order" (5).

Fourth, rapid transformations in public opinion, media, and the digital sphere have challenged official state narratives. Popular protests, the spread of social media networks, and rising political awareness have produced bottom-up resistance to top-down order-building initiatives. This gap has complicated decision-making processes and reduced the legitimacy of proposed regional orders (3).

From Dominance to Engagement: Transformation in the Logic of U.S. Foreign Policy

Following the gradual erosion of the unipolar order and the intensification of regional and global challenges, U.S. foreign policy in the third decade of the twenty-first century has undergone a fundamental transformation. This shift has moved away from a dominance-oriented logic grounded in direct intervention toward a more engagement-centered and constrained approach—one that has become particularly visible in the Persian Gulf and has produced strategic implications for regional order.

Shifting from Interventionism to Limited Cooperation

After two decades of costly interventions in the Middle East—especially in Afghanistan and Iraq—U.S. foreign policy gradually distanced itself from expansive interventionism and moved toward more limited and targeted cooperation. This shift reflected not only domestic pressures and resource constraints but also a transformation in Washington's strategic perception of threats and global priorities.

Across the presidencies of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, signs of reduced direct military commitments in the Persian Gulf became visible. The withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, the reduction of extraterritorial military operations, and a greater emphasis on multilateral diplomacy were components of this transformation. Instead, the United States attempted to preserve its regional role through arms sales, training of local forces, and intelligence-sharing arrangements (4).

This pattern of limited cooperation was designed to reduce human and financial costs while maintaining strategic influence. For example, arms contracts with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates not only strengthened their defense capabilities but also functioned as mechanisms sustaining security dependency on Washington. In addition, the United States sought to maintain a preferred security architecture without heavy direct presence through regional defense systems such as the “Persian Gulf missile shield” (5).

From a theoretical standpoint, this shift can be interpreted as a transition from “hard hegemony” to “smart hegemony,” meaning that the United States increasingly relies on soft instruments, technology, and targeted cooperation rather than direct military intervention. This logic, recognizing structural constraints and the growing role of rival powers, aims at participatory regulation rather than unilateral domination (3).

Preserving Influence Through Indirect Instruments

With the reduction of direct U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf—particularly after withdrawal from Afghanistan and reductions of combat forces in Iraq—American policymakers have increasingly relied on indirect instruments to preserve strategic influence. Unlike the overt interventions of previous decades, these instruments operate through soft, technology-enabled, and diplomatic mechanisms designed to maintain dependency structures without direct imposition.

One of the most important tools in this regard has been “smart” and targeted sanctions, especially imposed on Iran, Syria, and certain regional entities. By focusing on key sectors such as energy, finance, and technology, these sanctions seek to alter the behavior of regional actors without military intervention. In addition, through pressure on multinational corporations and international banks, the United States has maintained leverage within the region’s economic architecture (4).

In diplomacy, the United States has attempted to consolidate its preferred order through strengthening ties with traditional allies such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel, and by supporting regional arrangements such as the Abraham Accords. Rather than direct presence, this approach relies on building shared security and intelligence networks (5).

Media and communication technologies also function as instruments of indirect influence. By supporting digital platforms, civil society organizations, and cultural content production, the United States has sought to reproduce liberal discourse among younger regional generations. This soft-power influence has been particularly effective in relatively more open political environments, where societal and media spaces allow wider circulation of such narratives (3).

From a theoretical standpoint, this transformation can be analyzed within the framework of “smart hegemony,” which emphasizes the integration of hard and soft power and the use of indirect mechanisms to sustain strategic position. Within this logic, rather than direct coercion, the United States shapes regional order through rule-setting, information-flow control, and dependency management (1).

Redefining the U.S. Role in the Regional Order

In the wake of the gradual erosion of the unipolar order and the intensification of regional and extra-regional competition, the United States has been compelled to redefine its role in Persian Gulf order-building. This redefinition is observable not only at the strategic level but also at discursive and operational levels, reflecting a shift from the position of an “uncontested leader” toward that of a “participatory regulator.”

In previous decades, the United States played a dominant role in shaping the security equations of the Persian Gulf by relying on military power, regional bases, and security coalitions. However, rising costs of direct presence, declining international legitimacy, and the emergence of rival powers such as China and Russia imposed structural constraints on this role (4).

In response, rather than imposing order from above, Washington has increasingly moved toward facilitating regional dialogues, supporting multilateral initiatives, and managing competitive dynamics. For example, U.S. support for the Abraham Accords between Arab states and Israel, as well as efforts to revive the JCPOA through indirect negotiations, indicates a shift in the mode of engagement with regional actors (5).

Moreover, the United States has sought to shift its role from that of a “crisis-producing intervener” to a “crisis-oriented mediator.” In crises such as the Yemen war, Iran–Saudi tensions, and Iraq’s internal disputes, Washington has attempted—through multilayered diplomacy—to act as a regulating actor, although the success of these efforts has often remained partial (1).

From a theoretical standpoint, this redefinition can be analyzed within the framework of “moderated hegemony,” a concept emphasizing acceptance of multipolar realities, reduced decision-making monopoly, and efforts to preserve influence through targeted cooperation. Within this logic, the United States seeks not to eliminate rivals but to manage competition and maintain its relative position in the regional order (3).

Future Scenarios: Continuity, Retreat, or Strategic Reconfiguration

The transformation in the logic of U.S. foreign policy in the Persian Gulf has generated multiple scenarios regarding the future of America’s regional role. Depending on domestic U.S. variables, the behavior of rival powers, and regional dynamics, different trajectories may unfold. Three principal scenarios can be identified: constrained continuity, gradual isolationism, and strategic reconfiguration.

(a) Constrained Continuity

In this scenario, the United States maintains a certain level of military, diplomatic, and economic presence in the region, but without returning to expansive interventionism. Security cooperation with Arab states, arms sales, and participation in regional coalitions such as the Abraham Accords would be preserved. This approach is designed to manage threats and sustain relative influence while avoiding heavy costs (4).

(b) Gradual Isolationism

In this scenario, the United States gradually withdraws from the Persian Gulf due to domestic priorities, strategic competition with China in East Asia, and resource constraints. The full withdrawal from Afghanistan, reductions of combat forces in Iraq, and delegation of security responsibilities to regional allies are indicators of this trend. Such retrenchment could generate a power vacuum and intensify competition among regional and extra-regional actors (5).

(c) Strategic Reconfiguration

In this scenario, the United States redefines its role through multilateral participation, cooperation with regional powers, and support for indigenous regional order-building. Rather than pursuing dominance, Washington would prioritize facilitating regional dialogue, mediating conflicts, and strengthening regional institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council. By accepting multipolar realities, this approach aims to preserve influence through engagement and regulatory governance (1, 3).

Analytically, the realization of any of these scenarios depends on multiple factors, including U.S. electoral outcomes, energy-market developments, the behavior of China and Russia, and social dynamics within Arab states. In addition, regional actors' responses to changes in the U.S. role may accelerate or weaken the trajectory of these scenarios.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that the hegemonic logic of United States foreign policy in the Persian Gulf has undergone a profound transformation over the past three decades. In the immediate post–Cold War period, the United States operated within a framework of confident unipolar dominance. Relying heavily on military superiority, institutional influence, and liberal normative discourse, Washington sought to consolidate a regional order aligned with its strategic interests. The Persian Gulf served as a central arena for this project, functioning simultaneously as a strategic energy hub, a security frontier, and a symbolic space for demonstrating American global leadership. During this phase, hegemony was largely exercised through direct intervention, crisis management from above, and the projection of authority through both coercive power and ideological legitimacy.

Over time, however, structural pressures gradually eroded the sustainability of this model. The accumulation of military costs, prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, growing domestic fatigue with overseas interventions, and the emergence of competing global actors collectively undermined the effectiveness of dominance-based strategies. Equally significant was the decline in international legitimacy accompanying unilateral decision-making and the unintended consequences of regime-change policies. Regional societies increasingly questioned the gap between proclaimed goals such as democracy promotion and the destabilizing outcomes experienced on the ground. These dynamics revealed the limits of traditional hegemonic practices and compelled a strategic reassessment within American policymaking circles.

The transformation that followed did not represent an abrupt withdrawal from the region but rather a gradual adaptation. The United States shifted toward a more flexible and pragmatic approach that combined elements of hard and soft power while minimizing direct military exposure. Influence increasingly relied on indirect mechanisms such as targeted sanctions, technological capabilities, security partnerships, intelligence cooperation, and coalition diplomacy. Rather than imposing order unilaterally, Washington moved toward managing regional dynamics through selective engagement and burden-sharing with local allies. This adjustment reflects a broader transition from coercive dominance to adaptive regulation, where maintaining influence depends less on control and more on shaping environments, incentives, and networks of cooperation.

This evolution answers the central question of the study regarding how the hegemonic logic of U.S. foreign policy has changed and what consequences this transformation has produced for the regional order. First, the logic of hegemony itself has shifted from interventionist supremacy toward limited, interaction-oriented engagement. The United States has recognized that maintaining absolute dominance in a changing international system is neither economically sustainable nor politically feasible. Instead, it has sought to preserve relative leadership within a more competitive and decentralized environment. Second, the instruments of influence have changed significantly. Military intervention, once the defining feature of American strategy, has been complemented—and in some cases replaced—by economic leverage, diplomatic mediation, digital influence, and alliance-based governance. Third, the regional consequences of this transformation are evident in the increasing autonomy of local actors, the

diversification of external partnerships by Gulf states, and the weakening of singular security hierarchies that once defined the region.

The Persian Gulf today no longer operates within a strictly unipolar framework. Instead, it reflects the emergence of a multilayered geopolitical structure characterized by overlapping spheres of influence and diversified strategic alignments. Extra-regional powers such as China and Russia have expanded their presence through economic engagement, diplomatic activism, and selective security involvement, while regional actors including Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have pursued more independent foreign policies. Power is no longer concentrated in a single pole but distributed across multiple actors with varying capabilities and interests. This diffusion has increased flexibility and strategic choice for regional states but has also intensified competition and uncertainty.

The defining feature of this emerging order is complexity. Unlike the relatively predictable hierarchy of the 1990s, contemporary regional politics are shaped by simultaneous cooperation and rivalry across multiple levels. Economic partnerships may coexist with security competition, and diplomatic mediation may occur alongside proxy conflicts. No actor possesses sufficient power to impose a comprehensive regional order, and stability increasingly depends on negotiation, balancing behavior, and adaptive coordination rather than hegemonic enforcement. The region thus moves toward a decentralized participatory order in which interaction replaces unilateral dominance as the primary organizing principle.

For the United States, this transformation carries both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, reducing large-scale military commitments lowers financial and human costs and allows greater strategic focus on global priorities such as competition in East Asia and domestic economic challenges. On the other hand, diminished direct presence reduces Washington's ability to shape outcomes decisively and creates space for rival powers to expand influence. The United States must therefore navigate a delicate balance between retrenchment and continued engagement, ensuring that reduced intervention does not translate into strategic marginalization. Its future effectiveness will depend on the ability to coordinate alliances, maintain technological and economic advantages, and act as a mediator capable of managing rather than dominating regional dynamics.

For regional actors, the decline of direct American dominance has opened new avenues for strategic autonomy. Gulf states increasingly pursue diversified foreign policies, engaging simultaneously with multiple global powers while attempting to strengthen indigenous diplomatic and economic capacities. This diversification enhances bargaining power and reduces dependence on a single security patron. Yet greater autonomy also introduces new vulnerabilities. Intensified regional rivalries, ideological divisions, weak institutional mechanisms, and persistent security dilemmas create risks of instability in the absence of a clear stabilizing authority. The challenge facing regional actors is therefore to convert newfound independence into cooperative frameworks capable of preventing fragmentation and conflict escalation.

The broader implication of this study is that the transformation of U.S. foreign policy in the Persian Gulf reflects a systemic shift in global politics. The transition from a unipolar order toward a multilayered structure does not signify the disappearance of American influence but its reconfiguration. Hegemony has evolved from a condition of uncontested dominance into a dynamic process of negotiation, adaptation, and shared regulation. Power now operates through networks rather than hierarchies, through influence rather than imposition, and through interaction rather than unilateral command.

Ultimately, the future regional order will likely be shaped not by the return of a single hegemon but by the capacity of diverse actors to manage competition within cooperative boundaries. The United States remains a central participant in this evolving system, yet no longer its sole architect. The Persian Gulf thus stands as a microcosm of wider global transformation—a space where traditional notions of hegemony give way to pluralistic governance, strategic balancing, and continuous recalibration of power relations. The evolution from dominance to engagement represents not an end to American influence but the beginning of a new phase in which legitimacy, adaptability, and partnership determine the durability of leadership in an increasingly multipolar world.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Transparency of Data

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