

# RCAS Commentary

## State Sovereignty In The Shadow Of U.S. Hegemony

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## About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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## State Sovereignty In The Shadow Of U.S. Hegemony

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The contemporary international system is based on a pledge: the sovereign equality of the states, as the United Nations Charter proclaims. Practically, sovereignty has scarcely been absolute. Instead, it has been, to a large extent, haggled over, shackled, and even stamped by power politics in the long shadow of the United States. This tension has assumed a new dimension nowadays. Recent decisions of Donald Trump, especially in Venezuela and Iran, have brought back the discussion of the loss of sovereignty and weakening of a rules-based international order.



▲Confusion over the critical chokepoint threatened to deepen the energy crisis roiling the global economy and push the two countries toward renewed conflict, even as mediators expressed confidence a new deal was within reach. Iran’s joint military command said on Saturday that “control of the Strait of Hormuz has returned to its previous state ... under strict management and control of the armed forces.” AP News.

Washington has, over the decades, become a rule-maker and enforcer of a rule-based order, a democracy advocate, a free-market advocate, and a multilateralism advocate. Critics, however, have always found this order wanting in a paradox: there is selective application of rules, mostly in conformity with U.S. strategic interests. This contradiction has been much more focused, possibly even to the point, by the recent course of the U.S. foreign policy.

The loss of policy autonomy of smaller and mid-sized states is the first and most obvious immediate effect of U.S. hegemony. The weapons Washington can use to regulate other states’ actions have been based on embargoes, coercion, and the security dilemma. The one-sided cancellation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action, particularly the reinstatement of sanctions on Iran, demonstrated how one power can affect multilateral agreements not only on Tehran but also on European alliances and the global market.

In the same manner, the U.S. sanctions and outright encouragement of regime change against Venezuela have put the concept of non-intervention in a different perspective. To the majority of observers, such activities contradict the fact that states have the right to develop their own political systems without being imposed on by external forces. Here, sovereignty is conditional, rather than absolute.

This phase of world politics has also been referred to by other scholars as the Sopranos stage of imperialism, in which power is not directly imposed on anyone but rather exercised through networks of influence, coercion, and informal power. The comparison is didactic: as long as one of the mafia organizations remains active, the hegemon can enforce dominance through silent threats, selective pressure, or by establishing a sense of dependency.

In this model, there is no equality in making alliances; instead, there is hierarchy. States need not be obedient as they have signed it, but because the price of disobedience is too high. It establishes a system in which sovereignty is exchanged in the wake of economic sanctions, political isolation, or a security deficiency. It is not formal imperialism, like in classical colonialism, but it is as efficient.

The other facet of U.S. hegemony is its ever-present military presence worldwide. It has hundreds of bases abroad and is well entrenched in the sea, particularly in the key waterways, with a strong naval force that can showcase its might in an unrivaled fashion. Though this network may be touted as a stabilizing force worldwide, it raises questions about sovereignty and consent.

Host countries would be interested in such guarantees, but it would come at the price of diminishing their strategic freedom. Even the military infrastructure does not belong to them, and they can enlist the states in a conflict that they do not participate in, in case of a crisis. Moreover, the policy of war, whether selective strikes or even greater surveillance, must avoid multilateral procedures and further compromise the normative power of international law.

The difference between the formal obligation towards sovereignty and the real infringement of the latter can be referred to the idea of organized hypocrisy and is frequently connected to the concept of international relations. States, such as the United States, periodically declare their adherence to the UN Charter while engaging in actions that contradict it.

It is not the hypocrisy itself that Washington engages in, but the magnitude of U.S. might that carries more weight. Whenever the champion of the rules-based order seems to defy the rules, the validity of the whole system is put in question. The issue of small states is a dilemma, whether to adhere to the norms provided by the hegemon, which he is not always doing.

The outcome is a slow decline in trust in multilateral institutions and the rule of law. International law is no longer binding but more of a tool of convenience, applied selectively to justify certain actions.

In the meantime, the world is becoming less peaceful amid shifting power balances. The rise of regional powers like India, the resurgence of Russia, and the emergence of China are changing the world order through increased power. In this new form of multipolarity, state sovereignty is put to the test.

On the one hand, it allows smaller states to diversify their allies and avoid dependence on any particular power. Striking a compromise between adding a couple of partners to the board and not being overly attached to them can enhance the freedom and leverage. Quite the contrary, the augmented great-power rivalry can turn territories into contest arenas, and the impact of other countries will again confine sovereignty.

This transformation is a sign of a relatively unipolar American hegemony in decline. However, it does not mean that decadence is withdrawal. Rather, it can result in additional violence aimed at exerting influence, i.e., economic decoupling, technological competition, and new partnerships.

The U.S. hegemony is never lost, but re-created. Washington is in a dilemma of whether to follow the norms it has been advocating and its strategic interests. It is founded on the rediscovery of interest in multilateralism, the respect for international law, and actual cooperation with other states, on which the values of sustainable leadership would be founded.

This does not merely come down to policy, but it comes down to credibility in this rebuilding. Until there is congruence between U.S. leadership's actions and rhetoric, it will not be legitimized. The loveliness of order as rules is not in its predictability, or its justice to so many states, but in its ideals.

Meanwhile, smaller states will be forced to come to terms with this new reality. It can involve integrating national institutions, diversifying economic and security partnerships, and investing in regional collaboration to reduce external strain. No, in the 21st century, being a sovereign is not about independence, but about power in interdependence.

The idea of state sovereignty remains central in international relations, but it is reconstructed against the backdrop of U.S. hegemony and the broader shift toward multipolarity. These weaknesses of the rule-based order, such as its inconsistencies, have been observed in recent U.S. foreign policy, most notably under Donald Trump.

Whether this will be the time when that order will suffer or change will be determined by the decisions of great powers and minor states. Sovereignty must be supported by law to survive as a relevant notion, but also by political goodwill and respect. Otherwise, it is turning into just mere rhetoric in a world that is increasingly competitive.

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## About Author



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