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Empire and Hegemony

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Does the announced withdrawal from Iraq prove that [the U.S. is not an empire](#)? No, not really, but it is more useful to think about U.S. foreign policy in terms of hegemonism. Most of the people who would vehemently deny being imperialists will eagerly admit to being hegemonists, even if they don't use that word to describe themselves, because they regard hegemony (leadership) as something desirable and admirable. Some hegemonists drop the pretense that there is a meaningful difference between hegemony and empire, and they fully embrace the idea of America as a liberal (and therefore benevolent) empire. Others eschew the label of empire, but they are nonetheless adamant that U.S. hegemony (which they usually call leadership) must be "undisputed." In practice, the self-identifying neo-imperialists and the empire-denying hegemonists favor almost all of the same policies.

Almost everyone can agree that the U.S. is still the world's hegemonic military and political power, and the main points of contention here in the U.S. concern how to use that power and whether the U.S. should try to maintain "undisputed leadership" of the world. Obviously, global hegemony is a much more ambitious goal in some ways than traditional territorial/colonial empire, and it is based in what may possibly be an even more arrogant vision of America's proper role in the world, but it shares many features with imperial projects. The U.S. considers the internal affairs of other states to be the legitimate concern of our government, and it asserts the right to interfere in those affairs to influence them.

The U.S. treats several key regions of the world as privileged space where it is supposed to have military and political supremacy, and regional challengers to that supremacy are treated as potential threats to the U.S. because they infringe on what our government considers its sphere of influence. U.S. military commands [divide up the world](#), because it is taken for granted that the

U.S. has some proper military role in every part of the globe, and the U.S. has [hundreds of bases](#) scattered around the globe. The President has the ability to wage war largely on his own authority, and when he condescends to consult Congress it is now little more than a formality, so that the phrase “imperial Presidency” is as appropriate now as it has ever been. What the U.S. does not do is to establish direct political and administrative control over territories overseas. That sort of colonial empire became unfashionable and politically untenable in the decades after 1945, and the U.S. has not tried to bring it back. U.S. hegemony is a form of indirect empire, and an indirect empire is one most suited the idea of an empire dedicated to the liberal principle of self-determination.

Withdrawal from Iraq doesn't demonstrate that the U.S. is not an empire. Just because a state withdraws its forces from a country it has invaded and occupied for years doesn't mean that it hasn't acted as an empire does. After toppling a country's government, installing a new government that it initially believed would be more cooperative and subservient, and occupying its territory against the will of most of the population for almost a decade, the U.S. certainly acted imperially in Iraq, as Jacob Heilbrunn [notes](#). When a government reserves the right to overthrow other governments that oppose its policy goals, it assumes that other states' sovereignty is so limited that it can and should be violated when it suits the more powerful state. This is how many empires have acted in the past, and so it seems appropriate and accurate to refer to a contemporary American empire. If we call it hegemony instead, the substance of what we are talking about doesn't change at all, and the criticism of hegemonist policies remains the same. Hegemonists who reject the label of empire really do protest too much.