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Pax Americana

The term 'Pax Americana' most commonly refers to the period of overall yet by no means uninterrupted peace during the Cold War that in the prevalent interpretation hinged on the military, political and economic predominance of the United States, which after 1945 had emerged as one of the international system's two superpowers, alongside the Soviet Union. Notions of an 'American peace' have increasingly been connected with the rise of a novel American empire during and after the Cold War. Yet it seems more illuminating to interpret the closest approximation of an actual 'Pax Americana' to date, which indeed emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War as a hegemonic – rather than imperial – and essentially liberal peace system. The novel quality of US aspirations to recast international order derived not only from their global scope but also from their comprehensive and universalist nature. In their most ambitious manifestation, they followed the premise that durable peace requires more than a functioning system of treaties and diplomatic rules between nations – that it depends on the global extension of an international and internal order on American terms. At the core, these include principles of republican and, eventually, democratic government and a liberal mode of capitalism, all connected with political, cultural and social norms that the United States exemplified.

Arguably, US aspirations of this kind have had an unprecedented transnational impact. Positively, yet also negatively, they have affected global, regional and local transformation and modernization processes, particularly those gaining momentum after 1945 – first in Western Europe and Japan, later – particularly from 1989 – in Eastern Europe and also across many parts of the developing world. US approaches not only acquired more legitimacy than any of the 20th century's alternative visions of world and domestic 'order' – from traditional European balance-of-power concepts to the authoritarian countermodels of the 1930s and the Soviet 'empire' of the Cold War. Both in terms of their global influence and their universal scope they also exceeded any previous hegemonic peace systems in modern or ancient times, notably the 'Pax Romana' and the 19th century's 'Pax Britannica'.

Yet it should be noted, too, that the more a hegemonic 'American peace' seemed to prevail in the 20th century the more its legitimacy has also been challenged. Such challenges have not only arisen due to US conduct – e.g. during the Vietnam War or the 2003 invasion of Iraq – but also from the perceived harmful effects on political, economic and social structures of the wider development known as 'globalization' – with which, rightly or wrongly, the expansion of an 'American model' has often become identified. Most harmful, though, has been a characteristic tension that came to mark the American superpower's behaviour: the tension between the self-proclaimed transnational principles of a 'Pax Americana' and the invocation of overriding national interests and necessities – particularly in the sphere of security – that often led US administrations after 1945 to disregard such principles, notably by pursuing unilateral policies, according themselves special prerogatives and supporting undemocratic client regimes across the developing world.

At the outset, it is thus both useful and imperative to distinguish between two phenomena that can be associated with the term 'Pax Americana'. On the one hand, one can focus on deliberate attempts made by successive US governments – or informal agents acting on behalf of Washington or US high finance – to establish something akin to an 'American peace', and the consequences such attempts had, ever since Wilson's quest to make the world 'safe' for US-style democracy after the First World War. On the other hand, however, the global expansion of American approaches to peace also occurred by different means: as a consequence of the less direct but no less consequential transnational influence exerted by the American example, and America's economic power, across national and imperial boundaries. In short, ever since the United States gained independence its example came to challenge all more traditional forms of international order, notably the European 'balance-of-power' system of the latter 19th century, yet also domestic modes and orders, from monarchical and imperialist to authoritarian and communist variants. In the 20th century, processes of 'Americanization' affected not only the classic domains of international politics and economics but eventually all major spheres of political, economic and social organization, popular and elite culture, collective mentalities, and values.

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The origins of aspirations for an 'American peace'

Notions of a 'Pax Americana' and attempts to realize it do not originate with US postwar planning in the 1940s, nor even with Wilson's peace design. Indeed, the origins of such aspirations reach back considerably further: to US aspirations to establish a new order on the North American continent and to extend this order in the Western hemisphere.

In short, ever since its founders declared their independence from British rule in 1776, the history of America's relations with the world has been a history of attempts to develop a different approach to international relations, one that departed from Europe's 'harmful' traditions of autocratic rule and power politics. Most later conceptions of an 'American peace' remained informed by 17th-century Puritan ideas, essentially exceptionalist notions of a people 'chosen' by God to build a 'shining city on the hill' in the North American 'wilderness'. As stated in the influential *Federalist Papers* of 1788, the main aim of early US peace designs was to shield this 'shining city' from European encroachments. During the 19th century, this aspiration was extended to the wider Western hemisphere. The formative Monroe Doctrine of 1823 underpinned US claims for continental and later hemispheric supremacy. Its main author, John Quincy Adams, envisaged founding an American 'empire of liberty' distinct from the British empire, thus fulfilling America's 'manifest destiny'.

Outside the Western hemisphere, the US example soon exerted a powerful influence. In the 1830s, Tocqueville famously predicted that the American republic, as torch bearer for the global rise of democracy and 'middling' tendencies, would dominate the next century – alongside Russia. What the American founding fathers initiated could be invoked by 'progressive' forces across the world, first in revolutionary France, then during the European revolutions of 1848. Later, it also served as a template for anti-imperial and anti-colonial movements in South and East Asia, and for the reformers who – following the maxim 'Japanese spirit, Western things' – sought to learn from, yet not entirely adopt, American ways during Japan's Meiji era.

Starting with the Spanish-American War of 1898 the United States came to pursue both a formal and informal expansion of an imperialist 'American peace' in Latin America and the Pacific. In his 'corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine, advanced in 1904, Theodore Roosevelt claimed that the United States had the right to exercise 'an international police power' and to intervene in the internal affairs of countries in the Western hemisphere if they did not manifest US-style 'progress in stable and just civilization'. More broadly, what thus eventually gained predominance, first in an imperialist, then in a more internationalist guise was the conception of an 'Pax Americana' that was no longer 'exceptionalist' but rather 'exemplarist' and universal: the United States was to bring peace to, and set an example for, the rest of the world.

Wilson's quest for an American 'peace to end all wars'

It was only after the cataclysm of the First World War that Wilson could set out on the unprecedented path of actually proposing such a novel 'American peace'. In his influential 'Fourteen Points' address of 8 January 1918, Wilson asserted that peace could be fostered through a globalization of the US 'open door' policy, which was to further pacifying economic interdependence by breaking up the prewar period's closed blocs of imperial domination. Essentially, though, Wilson's 'Pax Americana' was to be founded not on economic or cultural premises but on new political foundations. He sought to create a radically altered international system to supersede European imperialism and the war-prone 'balance-of-power' system of the latter part of the 19th century. This was to be achieved by establishing a 'new world order' based on universal standards and rules of international law, collective security and national self-determination, enshrined in the Covenant of an unprecedented international institution: the League of Nations. Within the League, the 'strong' powers were to cooperate with 'weak' states on an equal footing, and they were to commit themselves to a security regime that required all League members to aid a victim of aggression. In other words, Wilson's was the first US attempt to establish not only a new international system but also in effect a distinctly American 'peace to end all wars'. This peace was to rest not merely on intergovernmental treaties and agreements. Rather, it was to be underpinned by the new supranational mechanism of the League and, essentially, the transnational power of enlightened 'world opinion'.

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Wilson's 'vision' was buttressed by America's newly gained financial and political dominance. In many ways, the United States was indeed poised to establish a global hegemony after 1918. The war had turned the new world creditor into the world economic system's principal power while Wall Street superseded the City of London as the hub of the global financial order. Following the catastrophe of the Great War, which had widely discredited the 'old' imperial or autocratic modes and orders, European and global receptiveness to American ways of organizing peace had grown significantly; and so had, potentially, America's ability to influence transnational processes of peaceful change. As Wilson came to acknowledge, however, he could not simply impose his peace design on the other peacemakers assembled at Versailles or on the societies he sought to lead on the path of self-government. Negotiating commonly acceptable principles and ground-rules of postwar order with the victors *and* the vanquished of 1918 indeed became a critical precondition for building a legitimate 'new world order'.

Of obvious transnational import was Wilson's assertion that, through its example, the United States was entitled to take the lead in recasting the geopolitical map across Europe and the world in accordance with the principle of self-determination. Yet his aspiration to universalize self-determination of course interfered with the internal affairs of other countries to an unprecedented extent. At the same time, however, Wilson's championing of self-determination had a significant effect not just on the subject peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but also on anti-colonial movements in the Middle East and South and East Asia (although many also seized on the alternative vision Lenin offered).

At Versailles, Wilson had to contend with a prevalent French approach to peace making that, under Premier Georges Clemenceau, sought to base postwar order on old-style foundations, particularly on a forceful containment of the vanquished Germany. In view of the massive problems he faced, it is not surprising that ultimately Wilson could not translate his peace design into a sustainable postwar order on American terms. As it came into existence, the Versailles Treaty system remained incomplete and unstable, particularly because it was forced on Weimar Germany. At the same time, the fact that the peace makers could only implement self-determination in an inequitable manner particularly left Central and Eastern Europe structurally destabilized; the newly recognized nation states of Poland and Czechoslovakia came to share contested borders with Germany.

To found a universal global order, Wilson also had to find ways of extending his 'vision' of peace beyond the Euro-Atlantic sphere – especially to East Asia. Here, too, his policies inspired aspirations for shedding colonial rule, notably a Korean 'proclamation of independence'. In the longer term, Wilson also sought to pave the way for Chinese self-determination. Yet the key problem he faced in 1919 was that of integrating imperial Japan into the League system. Not only in the Japanese perception, however, did the suspicion prevail that the US espousal of self-determination was yet another 'Western' attempt to cloak in declarations of 'justice' and 'equality' what was in fact a further stage of imperialist domination over 'inferior races'. Though often tactically motivated, such perceptions point to a critical challenge for the legitimacy of all 20th-century American peace designs. Unsurprisingly, Wilson did not succeed in laying the foundations for a 'new order' of self-determination in East Asia. Under the 'deal' he struck, Japan only agreed to join the League in return for America's recognition of its imperial control over the Chinese province of Shandong. Revealingly, though, Wilson declined to support the Japanese demand for a 'racial equality' clause in the Preamble to the League's Covenant – essentially because he feared the backlash this would provoke in the United States.

Yet it was in the US Senate that Wilson's peace efforts suffered a fatal blow when he failed to gain its support for the Versailles Treaty in 1919–20. Wilson's failure throws into relief a fundamental challenge also affecting all subsequent attempts to consolidate an 'American peace' in the 20th century – essentially, a twofold problem of legitimacy. In a transnational perspective, US decision makers had to persuade other states and societies that the peace policies they proposed were indeed superior to all previous approaches. At the same time, in a still vital national sphere they had to persuade the American public, and its elected representatives, that the international commitments

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they envisaged were not only necessary but also in America's 'national interest'.

Wilson's defeat by no means marked the end of US ambitions to transform international relations, and the world, in the American mould. His Republican successors in the 1920s pursued their own, though more limited attempts to extend a 'Pax Americana' to Europe and in East Asia. The key protagonists of such aspirations were the American Secretary of State Charles Hughes and, subsequently, President Herbert Hoover. Hughes' quest for a new transatlantic 'community of ideals, interests and purposes' recast America's postwar role. He promoted a novel transnational approach to resolving international disputes: the depoliticization of European power struggles, essentially through financial experts. Not bound by national allegiances, these experts were to propose rational remedies, especially a solution to the key postwar problem of reparations, which they did in the so-called Dawes process of 1923–24 and the subsequent Young process of 1928–29. Hughes' engagement paved the way for two first 'real' peace settlements between the Western powers and Germany after 1918: the London reparations settlement of 1924 and the Locarno security pact of 1925. In East Asia and the Pacific, Hughes led efforts to establish a – then short-lived – 'Pax Americana' through the so-called Washington Treaty system of 1922, which had the potential to develop into a global naval arms-control regime. It also was to guarantee China's integrity; but the Chinese status quo remained brittle.

Hoover advanced his own and in many ways more ambitious vision of an 'American peace'. He envisaged it as an expanding global system of liberal-capitalist states in which especially informal and transnationally collaborating experts and financial elites, such as the banking firm J. P. Morgan and Co., were to play an even more significant role, superseding the traditional primacy of political decision makers. The American model of the New Era was to set the new global standard; peaceful economic competition was to become the main mode in which states and societies interacted. The new hegemon was also to lead the way in Americanizing – i.e., rationalizing – the governmental, economic and social structures of other countries.

US aspirations of this kind did not merely lead to unprecedented levels of US capital export, which 'penetrated' national economies, notably Weimar Germany, where they often clashed with existing political, economic and sociocultural configurations. They also spurred transnational modernization processes and a first wave of 'Americanization' in and beyond Europe. Particularly the American model of capitalism and 'Fordian' industrial mass production made inroads into Europe's war-ravaged societies. But both the interwar period's 'Pax Americana' and the spread of 'Americanization' remained incomplete. They were constrained by the refusal of US governments in this period to make, and legitimate, wider political commitments to underpin the transformation of the global and internal order they desired. As a consequence, both collapsed during the world economic crisis of 1929–32.

The globalization of a 'Pax Americana' after the Second World War

Transcending Wilson's pursuits of 1919 and US policies in the 1920s, the third, in many ways more comprehensive and successful attempt to establish a global 'Pax Americana' was made in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the 1940s, US policy makers sought to draw harder lessons from what in their eyes had made the 20th century a century of total wars. First came the formative pursuit of an 'American peace' for 'One World' under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Building on cardinal Wilsonian maxims, yet also searching for new ways to realize them, Roosevelt envisaged a universal and integrative postwar order, premised on the 'Four Freedoms' of the 1941 Atlantic Charter. Free from fear or want, the peoples of and beyond Europe were also to be free to 'choose the form of government under which they will live'. In the international system Roosevelt mapped out, a benign American hegemon would co-operate with the Soviet Union, Britain and China as this system's 'Four Policemen' and create an effective supranational peace regime that rested on a more authoritative international organization, the United Nations. Eventually, it was to include both the victors and the vanquished of 1945, notably Germany and Japan.

Roosevelt based his vision of a 'Pax Americana' on the influential premise that the more US policy could open up avenues for integrating all states into a comparatively 'open' US-orientated international system, and the more it could promote the

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transnational adoption of an 'American way of life', the more even powers that, like the Soviet Union, originally adhered to a diametrically opposite ideology would over time gravitate to what he deemed the inherently more attractive US model. American internationalism of this kind made the United States into the principal power behind the United Nations. The Atlantic Charter indeed became a template for the UN Charter and its novel human rights regime, offering what has been called an American-style 'new deal' for the world. Subsequent US administrations during the Cold War pursued such aspirations further, from Kennedy's 'Alliance for Progress' in the 1960s to the Carter administration's focus on human rights in the latter part of the 1970s.

Immediately after the Second World War, the United States also led the way in establishing the novel institutions of the Bretton Woods system – chiefly, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It thus made a decisive contribution to the establishment of new international mechanisms that, though later marred by tendencies to impose austerity programmes on particular countries or regions, overall created unprecedented possibilities for transnational cooperation and economic development. In the wider horizon of the 20th century, Roosevelt's approach to world order proved formative. In many ways, it gained new prominence with the revolutions of 1989.

Formative for the era of the Cold War, however, became another and more sustained bid for a post-1945 'Pax Americana'. It was advanced under the Truman administration, and was significantly conditioned by the escalating confrontation with the Soviet Union in what turned into the 20th century's Cold War. The Truman administration, and all US governments that followed it until 1991, would pursue the bid for a 'Pax Americana' under the leitmotif of containment, not integration. Containing the spread of Soviet influence in every sphere – from the 'heights' of superpower relations to the level of local politics, economics and culture – became the central US mission, whose long-term aim remained to overcome the Soviet system and globalize an 'American peace'. In what became the American sphere of influence, also known as the 'free world', the Truman government made unprecedented commitments to the collective security organization of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and – in contrast to the 1920s – to a transnationally organized postwar reconstruction, especially – through the Marshall Plan – in Europe, or more precisely Western Europe. Here, the United States also came to support novel efforts to achieve supranational integration. US policy also provided the most important external stimulus for the democratization and international (re)integration of what became West Germany. In East Asia, it promoted the overall successful recovery and rehabilitation of a postwar Japan 'embracing defeat'. In some ways, the expansion of US hegemony came to be seen as such an attractive alternative to previous authoritarianism and disorder that it took the form of an 'empire by invitation'.

The Second World War had catapulted the United States – alongside the Soviet Union – into a preponderant position without parallel in modern history, not just as a military and political superpower and the world's unchallenged economic hegemon but also – far more than even after 1918 – as one predominant political, economic and cultural 'model of the future'. In one interpretation, the United States became an 'empire of production' during the 'golden age' of rising Western prosperity (roughly, the period between the late 1940s and the mid 1970s) before turning into an 'empire of consumption'. Yet, as already noted, US predominance went far beyond the economic realm. Both positively and negatively, concrete US engagement and the indirect power of the American example spurred profound transnational changes: from Western European economic reform and political modernization to the emergence of a US-style consumer and popular culture, nourished by American advertising and the powerful imagery of Hollywood, all influencing not just international and domestic political norms but also and cultural and social expectations. This second and far more enduring wave of postwar 'Americanization' first affected Western Europe and Japan. After the Cold War, though, it became a key catalyst for the wider transnational development known as 'globalization'. The underlying message of the American peace offer to the Western world, and beyond it, was unequivocal: that it was in everybody's 'natural interest' to shun communist alternatives and become part of a democratic and capitalist 'Western system' under the aegis of the United States.

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Challenges to the 'Pax Americana's' legitimacy

Yet ever since 1945 the legitimacy of an 'American peace' has also been exposed to corrosive tendencies. On one level, this can be attributed to the fact that US international conduct often became marked by double standards. Avowed US principles all too often clashed with what US decision makers invoked as cardinal necessities of US national security. Notably, Washington came to support not only democratic governments but also a plethora of more or less authoritarian client regimes across the globe as long as they prevented Communist 'infiltration' or helped to protect US energy interests. This occurred particularly in Latin America – where Chile's Pinochet regime furnishes the most notorious example – yet also in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, where American administrations firmly aligned themselves with, for example, the Shah regime in Iran and Saudi Arabia's ruling dynasty.

US efforts to act as an 'honest broker', as pursued specially under the Carter and Clinton administrations, have remained indispensable for achieving any progress in resolving the crucial Israeli–Palestinian conflict ever since the foundation of the Jewish state in 1948. What has often been – rightly – criticised as one-sided American support for Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinian people, however, has had a highly detrimental effect on the legitimacy of US peace policies. Yet probably nothing has ever done more damage in this respect than the US intervention in Iraq in 2003, which most observers, and most other powers, in fact deemed illegal under existing international law. The same can be said for the second Bush administration's wider neoimperial agenda of imposing its version of an 'American peace', not least through the 'democratization' of a 'Greater Middle East', to contain new forms of transnational terrorism.

In a wider 20th-century perspective, what came to be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as overbearing US 'imperialism' – or 'Americanization' – has not only intensified the search for alternative, mostly socialist or social-democratic alternatives. It has also provoked manifold political, economic, social, and cultural counterdevelopments, many of them transnational in scope. Opposition to US hegemony notably became a rallying point for pacifist and student protest movements during the Vietnam War era, protests against the Reagan administration's nuclear armament programmes in the early 1980s, and the 'anti-globalization' movements of the early 21st century. Prone to simplified critiques, the latter have tended to view the in their eyes harmful effects of globalization – the novel transnational 'dictatorship' of multinational corporations and unrestrained capitalism – as the outgrowth of US ambitions to expand, not an 'American peace' but an 'American empire'.

Patrick Cohrs

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