How Amoral *Is* Hegemon?

By Robert E. Goodin

In the post–Cold War world, the last remaining superpower is almost hegemonic. Almost, but not quite. The United States cannot act *entirely* on its own. It needs—or thinks it needs, or pretends it needs—the support of at least a few other countries in almost anything it does. But it only needs a few, and many could serve equally well.

Although that may not quite be true of all policy areas,[1] some such thinking certainly underlies the country's "floating coalition" for its "war against terror."[2] Echoing President George W. Bush, the U.S. Department of Defense says:

> The war against terrorism is a broad-based effort that will take time. Every nation has different circumstances and will participate in different ways. This mission [against the Taliban] and future missions will require a series of coalitions ready to take on the challenges and assume the risks associated with such an operation.[3]

Bush himself says, "Some countries may want to participate in one way, but not in another."[4] Some countries will join the fight against one foe, others against other foes. But "make no mistake about it: if they do not act, America will."[5] No particular ally is an indispensable element of any coalition. No other country enjoys a veto against American action. Bush's stance is clear: "Our mission will not change to fit any coalition's."[6]

Such is the rhetoric. So too is the action. As the *Washington Post* reports:

> Washington has established a floating coalition of allies, friends, useful strangers and the occasional opportunist to chase Osama bin Laden's network. But in waging war on Afghanistan, the Pentagon prefers an alliance of one, or at most one and a half.
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> The United States has gratefully accepted the help of police, intelligence and financial authorities around the globe to track al Qaeda's operatives, money and plots. Washington has also used the airspace, ports and bases of a few nations to get in position to attack.
>
> But the strike force assaulting Afghanistan is essentially an all-American affair, with the important involvement of British commandos.
>
> Paradoxically, after hectoring its European allies for years to get more interested in NATO operating outside Europe, Washington today is setting aside for the time being offers of direct military help from France, Germany, Italy, Spain and others.
>
> The painful memories of command and control coordination problems in the Kosovo air war of 1999 and the Persian Gulf War of 1991 are still fresh. And the remote and fractured nature of the theater of operations in and around Afghanistan makes simpler a lot better.[7]

Evidence from experimental games should make us very wary of an Almost Hegemon of this sort. In the psychological laboratory, anyway, the dominant player in an "any of many" coalition game proves to be even less solicitous of the interests of the junior partner(s) than is an absolute dictator, who needs no allies. If transferable to the real world, these findings seem to suggest that an Almost Hegemon is worst of all: even an Absolute Hegemon would treat others more fairly; and a Semihegemon, with few junior partners to choose among, would be fairer yet.

An "any of many" coalition game has twin features: (a) one player dominates and (b) that dominant player can choose "any of many" of the remaining players as a coalition partner.

That characterization fits U.S. national security policy in the post–Cold War world; but we have seen this strategic structure many times before. Think of the Marxian analysis of how capitalists manage to exploit workers.[8] There is only one employer, but there are many potential employees. The "reserve army of the unemployed" stands willing to take the jobs of any workers who demand higher wages, and that reduces the bargaining power of existing workers to near zero. That explains why capital hires labor, rather than labor hiring capital.

The solution, in the case of workers, lies in collective bargaining. The international analog might be to require Hegemon to bargain with the rest of the world collectively—through, for example, the UN Security Council. It is hard to imagine what in the foreseeable future could possibly force the U.S. Hegemon to that particular bargaining table.

In any case, collective bargaining is hard enough even for workers in a single firm, let alone in a whole industry. Still, at least all potential workers have a common interest in collective action for full employment at fair wages.

Not so in alliance politics. The United States' potential allies differ, often dramatically, in their interests and perspectives. Nonetheless, the American Hegemon does not need many partners. In fact, any will do; and it is usually not hard to find enough

Robert E. Goodin is professor of social and political theory and philosophy at the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. He can be reached at goodinb@coombs.anu.edu.au. *An earlier version of this article was presented to the International Sociological Association World Congress, Brisbane, in August 2002. The author is grateful for comments, then and later, from Mattei Dogan, Christina Fong, Gerry Mackie, Claus Offe, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Dave Schmidtz, Duncan Snidal, and this journal's editors and referees.*

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who, for one reason or another, will play along in return for minimal concessions.

The fact that "any of many" situations *seem* like bargaining games—albeit of a radically degenerate form—makes matters worse in dealings with Almost Hegemons. To see how, let's turn to some classic results from experimental games.[9]

The Dictator Game

Consider first the case of an Absolute Hegemon, who does not have to cut a deal with anyone and can do just as it pleases. This situation can be represented by what game theorists call the Dictator Game, the standard form of which has two players dividing a pot of money (on the order of $10 in laboratory experiments). One player is the dictator. The rules of the game are simple: the division is whatever the dictator says, end of story. The other player gets no say in the matter at all, not even on a "take it or leave it" basis: that is how the Dictator Game differs from the Ultimatum Game (described below).

The surprising thing—for economists, anyway—is that in psychology lab games, dictators do not keep everything for themselves. On average, across a wide range of experiments in diverse settings, dictators ordinarily allocate around 20 percent of the pot to the other player, despite the fact that nothing in the strategic structure of the situation would force them to do so. Even dictators, it seems, have a residual sense of fairness that prevents them from running completely roughshod over people utterly within their power.

I will turn now to the Ultimatum Game, in which players require minimal support from some other player(s).

The Ultimatum Game: Two Players

In its standard form, the Ultimatum Game involves two players: a proposer and a responder. The former proposes a division of a pot of money, and the latter can then either accept or reject the proposal. If it is accepted, both players get whatever was proposed; if it is rejected, neither player gets anything.

In this two-person version of the Ultimatum Game, responders have power (if only the power to say "yea" or "nay") in a way that their counterparts in the Dictator Game do not. Strictly speaking, of course, it is always in the responder's interest in a one-shot game to accept any nonzero proposal. Still, even in one-shot Ultimatum Games, responders generally suffer a piqued sense of injustice and as a result reject proposals that give them too little; in anticipation of that rejection, proposers tend to make larger offers in the Ultimatum Game (around 40 percent of the pot) than in the Dictator Game. This result is reliably robust across a wide range of experimental settings.

In the standard two-person Ultimatum Game, the proposer might be dubbed a Semihegemon. To the extent that she or he gets to specify the terms of cooperation, the proposer is dominant. But his or her power is restricted, because the Semihegemon needs the assent of one specific respondent for the deal to go through.

The Ultimatum Game: Multiple Partners

For an analog of an Almost Hegemon of the sort represented by the United States in its war on terror, we need to examine what happens in an Ultimatum Game with multiple responders, where any *one* of many can take up the proposer's offer.

In such a game, the proposer proposes a division of money. Each responder can then either accept or reject the proposal. If no responder accepts the proposal, then no one gets anything; if one responder accepts the proposal, then the money is divided between that responder and the proposer on the terms proposed, and all other responders get nothing; if more than one responder accepts the proposal simultaneously, then a random process determines which one of them will share the pot with the proposer on the terms proposed, with the rest getting nothing.

The presence of multiple responders changes the game's strategic structure dramatically. It diminishes the power of each responder. A responder can no longer ensure punishment for a stingy proposer through his or her own rejection of an inadequate offer: if he or she does not accept the proposal, some other responder might. The proposer may need some responder or another to accept, but any one of many will do. While the power of responders to punish stingy proposers is divided and hence diminished, however, the sense of fairness that prevented dominant players in the Dictator Game from exploiting their absolute power is not reinstated.

Recall that in a two-person Ultimatum Game—when the proposer has to cut a deal with *one particular* responder—the sole responder is generally offered a moderately fair share (40 percent) of the pot. The few research groups that have explored the Ultimatum Game with multiple responders have concentrated on other aspects of market behavior. Only one team, to my knowledge, has investigated how multiple responders undermine incentives for fairness, and their results are striking. When any one of *five* responders can accept the offer, the proposer in an Ultimatum Game drops her or his offer to around 10 percent of the pot.[10] And that is only half of what even dictators offer to people utterly at their mercy.

With Power Comes Responsibility

What is going on here? How could players who have to negotiate with one another (albeit on very unequal terms) be *less* inhibited in their pursuit of pure self-interest than are players capable of acting without consulting anyone?

The answer, I believe, is that people really do internalize the axiom that "with power comes responsibility." They internalize it imperfectly—at a rate of something like 20 percent (based on evidence from the Dictator Game, in which the "other" is powerless even to "take it or leave it"). Nonetheless, when we have absolute power over others, we take *some* account of their interests, as a matter of moral principle. In those situations, we are subject to internalized moral discipline.

When others have power too, however, we tend to assume that it is up to them to look out for their own interests, and our own sense of responsibility for others evaporates. Principle gives way to prudence; internalized moral discipline gives way to the external discipline of bargaining power. When others are free to reject or accept our offer, as in the Ultimatum Game, we feel morally at liberty to bargain.

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In short, the appearance of having to "bargain with others" gives an Almost Hegemon license to ignore the interests of others in a way that even an Absolute Hegemon would not. That, I surmise, is why players in any of many bargaining positions are only half as moral as dictators.

Moving out of the laboratory and into the world of international politics, geopolitical dynamics might actually exacerbate the immorality of Almost Hegemons. For various reasons—some principled, others pragmatic—states seek legitimacy for their actions, from both domestic and international audiences. In the case of an Absolute Hegemon acting all on its own, that desired legitimacy is best (and perhaps only) secured through a policy of conspicuous self-restraint. When one state must act in league with others (even just a few select others, as with an Almost Hegemon), legitimacy can be conferred by those other states.

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In an "any of many" game played globally, therefore, the consent of allies secured on the cheap can replace self-restraint as a source of legitimacy, thus heightening the tendency toward selfishness among Almost Hegemons observed in the psychology laboratory.

Conclusion

Experimental games suggest, then, that suffering under an Almost Hegemon is the worst of all worlds. In summary, here is why:

- An Absolute Hegemon would be fairer than an Almost Hegemon by a factor of two. It would be more self-disciplined and more accommodating of others' views. Further, it would do so as a matter of internalized moral principle, not as a matter of political prudence.
- A Semihegemon in a position to put ultimata to only *one* other potential partner, whose cooperation is required, would be fairer than an Almost Hegemon by a factor of four. The interests and perspective of the crucial "other" would be given nearly equal status to the Semihegemon's as the realistic cost of the other's cooperation, even in such asymmetrical situations as the Ultimatum Game. In this game, the discipline of external power substitutes successfully for internalized moral discipline.
- An Almost Hegemon who requires cooperation from "any of many" others is largely free of both internalized moral constraints and external political constraints. It feels no obligation to internalize the moral self-discipline of the all-powerful. Yet an Almost Hegemon's ability to choose "any of many" others as a coalition partner greatly diminishes the extent to which those others have any power.

How clearly findings from laboratory experiments and hypothetical games translate into the real world is always an open question. Negotiators may not be rational, especially in crisis situations.[11] Findings about individual behavior may not reliably predict the behavior of collectivities such as states.[12] And so on. Still, there is a long tradition of thinking about international relations in loosely game-theoretic ways of precisely this sort.

Among scholars of international relations, of course, methodological wars continue to rage.[13] Whatever one's view of the success of the more highly technical "second-wave" rational-choice theorists of international relations, however, all concerned seem to agree that much has been gained heuristically from "first wave" applications of proto–game theory (using simple game-theoretic ideas more informally to motivate conjectures about the processes at work).[14] Such low-tech applications have elucidated phenomena ranging from arms racing to fisheries' negotiations.[15]

Note that the findings discussed in this paper come from games in experimental settings—the descriptive (not prescriptive) branch of decision theory, which explores what people are psychologically prone to do rather than what people ought to do according to canons of hyperrationality. The results of experimental games are reality checks for formalists, who aspire to assimilate all such phenomena within their models. Eventually, they might well succeed. My point here is merely that we need not take a position within the larger methodological wars. Both parties in those disputes must take seriously such findings as are here reported from low-tech, experimental games.

The implications of the experiments are clear. There is nothing worse—nothing more bullheaded, selfish, and tyrannical—than an Almost Hegemon. In today's world, that conclusion resonates.

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Notes

1 Snidal 1985.
2 Powell 2002.
3 U.S. Department of Defense 2002; see similarly Bush 2001a and 2001b.
4 Bush 2001a.
5 Bush 2002.
6 Bush 2001a.
7 Hoagland 2001.
8 Cohen 1983.
9 See, e.g., Forsythe et al. 1994, Camerer and Thaler 1995, Hoffman et al. 1996, Camerer 1997, Henrich et al. 2001, Fehr and Fischbacher 2002, Camerer 2002, ch. 3.
10 Fehr and Fischbacher 2002, C9, summarizing Fischbacher et al. 2002, describe how they experimented with "Ultimatum Games with one, two and five Responders. To allow for convergence and learning effects, in each experimental session a large group of subjects played the same game for 20 periods. . . . In every period the Proposers and Responders were randomly re-matched to ensure the one-shot nature of the interactions." In one-Responder games, Proposers quickly settled into a pattern of offering around 40 percent to Respondents. In two-Responder games, Proposers offered less from the start and, after learning how little they could get by offering, settled at around 20 percent toward the beginning of the second half of the experiment. In five-Responder games, "the share offered [by Proposers to Respondents goes down even further . . . [and] comes close to 10 percent in the second half of the session." Cf. Güth and Tietz 1990; Roth et al. 1991.
11 Snyder 1978.
12 Allison 1971.
13 Cf. Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1985, Achen et al. 1989, Walt 1999, and Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999.
14 Walt 1999, 8–10.
15 Etzioni 1967; Underdal 1980.

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