

Even Crime Bosses Give Back: The Crisis of the American Leadership in the Changing World Order

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Abstract

This article analyzes the erosion of American global leadership through a policy-oriented application of Charles Tilly’s “protection racket” framework, arguing that hegemonic power is sustained not by coercion alone but by the credible delivery of security, economic benefits, and institutional stability to allies and partners. As strategic competition with China intensifies, the United States faces growing risks of alliance defection and institutional decay driven by inconsistent commitments, domestic political constraints, and an overreliance on military power. China’s expansion of alternative leadership structures through BRICS, the Belt and Road Initiative, and non-conditional economic engagement highlights the policy costs of U.S. leadership retrenchment. The article contends that restoring American leadership requires deliberate policy choices that prioritize alliance reassurance, investment in international institutions, competitive economic statecraft, and leadership-through-connectedness rather than episodic force projection. The analysis concludes that failure to meet these leadership obligations will accelerate the fragmentation of the U.S.-led international order, while renewed commitment to relational and institutional leadership offers a viable pathway for preserving American strategic advantage.

Keywords: Hegemonic leadership, strategic competition, protection racket theory, American global leadership, China, BRICS, international order, alliance politics, connectedness, irregular warfare

¹ Irregular Warfare Initiative.

Introduction

The current era of strategic competition between the United States (U.S.) and China represents a more complex challenge to the stability of the post-World War II world order than during the previous Cold War. Not only are revisionist powers like China and Russia challenging American global superiority, but these adversaries are also deeply challenging American global leadership through alternate means of competition that fall outside of traditional arms races and indirect military engagement. These irregular challenges require that the U.S. face an existential question: How can American global leadership continue when the liberal international order itself is threatened by totalitarianism?

This paper argues that Charles Tilly’s “protection racket” framework provides valuable insight into how American global leadership must evolve to remain relevant in strategic competition.² Just as Tilly articulated that successful state-making requires leadership capable of providing their followers with tangible benefits that encourage loyalty and resource sharing, effective global leadership in strategic competition also obliges the U.S. to similar obligations to its allies and partners—or risk their defection to competing power centers.

Given America’s leadership role in shaping this era of stability, it follows that U.S. leadership would involve a de facto exercise of protective authority over its allies to shape the dynamic changes in power that have matured from industrial-focused economic production to modern advances in computers and artificial intelligence. Likewise, the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from 12 founding members to the current 30 has paired U.S. military power with economic leadership with a formal structure that not only won the Cold War but has provided decades of post-Cold War stability in support of American leadership through two decades of the global war on terror.

However, as American leadership and NATO expansion stalled, American counter-terrorism efforts surged, leading to an unanticipated but meteoric rise in China’s relative military and economic power. This newfound strength has since been leveraged into a growing economic order with the potential to outpace NATO. As Burrell and Long (2026) noted, by recognizing that American leadership has focused on securing European states and the Global North, “China tapped into the Global South’s continued frustrations with the U.S.-led world order and organized a counter-NATO structure (BRICS) that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (joined in 2010).” Although largely informal compared to NATO, the push of Chinese leadership via the rapidly expanding BRICS organization (more than doubling from 2009 to 2025) provides significant challenges to the static nature of U.S.-led leadership.

Adding salience to the reality of expanding Chinese global leadership, a recent rise in isolationist-oriented domestic political movements has softened American messaging about its commitment to long-standing partners, allies, and international institutions. From a leadership perspective, this commitment reduction, at a time when Chinese leadership is on the rise, presents a significant threat to the global stability afforded by American

2 Charles Tilly, 1985, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” *Bringing the State Back In*, edited by Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, Cambridge University Press, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/bringing-the-state-back-in/war-making-and-state-making-as-organized-crime/7A7B3B6577A060D76224F54A4DD0DA4C>

leadership. In short, America's decline in international leadership, coupled with China's semi-organized leadership increase through both the Chinese Belt and Road initiative and BRICS, reflects a leadership failure that is reflective of Charles Tilly's works on state power. The U.S. must recognize the leadership obligations that result from being positioned at the top of a global networked hierarchy of states—where economic prosperity and military security give rise to prominence and power.

Theoretical Framework: Hegemonic Leadership, Strategic Competition, and Protection Rackets

Defining Key Concepts

For this analysis, **hegemonic leadership** refers to the provision of public goods by a dominant power that maintains international order through a combination of material capabilities and institutional authority.³ **Strategic competition** represents the sustained rivalry between great powers seeking to shape the international system according to their preferred norms, institutions, and distributions of power. **International order** encompasses the formal and informal rules, institutions, and practices that govern state behavior in the international system.⁴

Tilly's Protection Racket Framework Applied to International Relations

To understand the scope and reality of the U.S. leadership responsibilities over the current global world order, it is helpful to explore Charles Tilly's famous argument that "warmaking and state-making" are nothing more than expansions of "organized crime" at the macro-level of human political organization.⁵ Looking beyond the provocative nature of Tilly's arguments about political control toward a leadership-based understanding of organized crime, Tilly's observations about European rulers' involvement in a "protection racket" support the reality that early European rulers understood their leadership imperatives for providing security to their citizens in exchange for obedience to the ruler and economic support through taxation.

As Tilly explained, "War making, extraction, and capital accumulation interacted to shape European state-making. Rulers squeezed resources from conquered territories and protected or tried to protect the economies that flourished within their jurisdictions."⁶ This argument reflects the competitive nature of state leadership, both within state boundaries and across competing states, which justifies the state's right to extract such resources.

3 Robert O. Keohane, 1984, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sq9s>.

4 G. John Ikenberry, 2001, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars*, Princeton University Press, <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691192840/after-victory?srsltid=AfmBOorGocxnq0pK40NcRPjs12bbD-cJ242MkVgK5n-tCs2BilkuxJj>.

5 Tilly, 1985, p. 170.

6 Tilly, 1985, p. 171.

Building on the logic of a protection racket's required four activities – the need to eliminate external rivals through war-making, the requirements to eliminate internal rivals through state-making, the obligation to protect one's members from competing states, and the right to extract the necessary resources to accomplish the first three – this paper thus argues that the U.S.-led global order represents a macro-level protection racket that obligates similar leadership objectives for crime families as for organized states.

Strategic Competition and Leadership Obligations

This framework is particularly relevant to understanding strategic competition as rival powers like China are actively offering alternative forms of “protection” to states within the U.S.-led order. China's approach through BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative represents a direct challenge to American leadership by promising developing nations infrastructure investment, reduced political conditionality, and respect for authoritarian governance models, argued to be more available and far superior to traditional Western engagement.

Strategic competition thus becomes a contest over which power can more effectively fulfill the obligations of the protection racket. As Harvard's Graham Allison noted in his analysis of the Thucydides Trap, rising powers challenge established hegemony not merely through military means, but by demonstrating superior ability to provide for the needs of potential allies and partners.

Therefore, if the U.S.-led world order functions similarly to Tilly's criminal protection racket, it follows that the U.S. likewise takes on the same leadership obligations as the crime boss. Furthermore, just as failure to eliminate internal and external rivals constitutes catastrophic leadership failure for a crime boss, so too does failure to secure the very global order that places the U.S. at the top of the worldwide hierarchy constitute a similar leadership failure for America.

American political leaders cannot expect to extract loyalty and support from allies and partners without ensuring that each member of the U.S.-led network is better off under American leadership than under the leadership of any other state. Lastly, it also follows that if another state becomes capable of providing better stability for the welfare of the membership, the potential for members to reject American leadership in favor of an emerging leader rises exponentially.

What America Gains from Global Leadership: The Benefits of Hegemony

Following the devastation of most of Europe and Asia following World War II, the U.S. emerged as a new economic and military power capable of leading the globe in what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”⁷ As such, the U.S. became uniquely positioned to shape the development of global institutions according to traditional American interests and values that emphasized stability, prosperity, and interconnection in a worldwide order

⁷ Henry Luce, 1941, “The American Century,” *Life Magazine*, 17 February, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24913736> .

that simultaneously prevented a recurrence of large-scale military conflict and promoted American economic and security interests. This ability to shape the global order gave the U.S. significant benefits across the dimensions of national power.

Economic Advantages

American hegemonic leadership has created what Jonathan Kirshner coined as “monetary privileges” through the dollar’s role as the global reserve currency, allowing the United States to finance deficits at lower costs and export inflation to other economies.⁸ The U.S. capitalized on its emerging role in global leadership in promoting the Bretton Woods system that aligned global economic power under U.S. leadership by establishing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which allowed the U.S. to promote global economic cooperation across developed nations and to sponsor financial assistance for developing states.⁹ Although Bretton Woods would collapse decades later, it nonetheless provided a venue for American leadership to shape an integrated and stable global economy.

Beyond monetary advantages, U.S. leadership of international economic institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization has enabled America to shape global trade rules in ways that generally favor advanced economies with sophisticated financial sectors and high-technology industries.¹⁰ American companies have disproportionately benefited from the intellectual property protections, market access provisions, and dispute resolution mechanisms embedded in the liberal international economic order.

Military and Security Advantages

From a security perspective, the U.S. provided significant leadership in establishing NATO as an organization capable of deterring Soviet expansion through a formal system of collective security across North America and Western Europe. Additionally, the U.S., in exercising global leadership independent of NATO, pursued a series of bilateral agreements across East Asia that supported NATO’s counter-Soviet agenda while also protecting American economic interests.¹¹

The U.S.-led security architecture has also enabled America to maintain what Barry Posen called “command of the commons”—dominance in air, sea, and space domains that provides global power projection capabilities unavailable to potential rivals.¹² This military

8 Jonathan Kirshner, 1995, *Currency and Coercion: The Political Economy of International Monetary Power*, Princeton University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv173f2mk> .

9 Barry Eichengreen, 2019, *Globalizing Capital: A History of the International Monetary System* (3rd ed.), Princeton University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7pfmc> .

10 Eichengreen, 2019.

11 Thomas J. Christenson, 1999, “China, the US, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia,” *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539294?seq=1> .

12 Barry Posen, 2003, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security*, vol. 28, no. 1, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/command-commons-military-foundation-us-hegemony>.

primacy is sustained through alliance burden-sharing efforts and leadership that helps reduce the full costs of maintaining an international presence.

Institutional Influence

The U.S. also played a significant leadership role in supporting the creation of the United Nations (UN). Although the UN faces criticism for being inefficient, the preponderance of data affirms the existence of the UN as a valuable forum for advancing global cooperation for both military and economic stability. The fact that the UN headquarters has resided in New York City since 1952 further supports America's ability to leverage global leadership in the post-World War II world order, where the UN has been called "both a symbol of peace and a beacon of hope" for global stability and prosperity.¹³

To be sure, American leadership since the end of World War II has produced a global order that reflected liberal values, free trade, and collective security. Essentially, the U.S. benefited from a newly created world order that privileged American access to new markets, greater resources, and innovative investment opportunities. Likewise, membership in the U.S.-led order also delivered significant benefits for allies and partners, including U.S.-sponsored security guarantees, economic assistance, and political support, resulting in an unprecedented period of global peace between great powers in the post-World War II era.

Given the trajectory of American global leadership, what remains in question is the degree to which American political leaders will continue to meet the obligations of leadership according to the "protection racket" framework or suffer the costs that the racketeering metaphor implies. If even crime bosses recognize their obligations to their membership, does this metaphor imply that American leadership must recognize similar commitments?

The Obligations of Leadership

Following Tilly's "protection racket" analogy offers rare insight into leadership obligations facing similarly oriented criminal enterprise leaders. If a crime boss recognizes that leadership over a crime family involves much more than coercion, it follows that similar organizations would also need additional leadership tools. Thus, if a criminal enterprise necessitates providing tangible benefits for its membership that foster loyalty and stabilize rules and norms, the U.S. must fulfill similar leadership obligations for those under its hegemonic influence.¹⁴

Traditional Hegemonic Obligations

Classical hegemonic stability theory, as developed by Charles Kindleberger in 1973 and later refined by Robert Keohane in 1984, identifies several core obligations that dominant powers must fulfill to maintain international order. Hegemons wishing to sustain effective

¹³ History of UN Headquarters, n.d., *United Nations*, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/history-of-the-un>.

¹⁴ Diego Gambetta, 1993, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*, Harvard University Press, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/000169939603900215>.

leadership must take responsibility for providing security through alliance guarantees and military presence, maintaining global economic stability through crisis management and ensuring equality in access to global markets, investing heavily in empowering international institutions through funding and diplomatic leadership, and actively enforcing agreed-upon rules and norms even when doing so conflicts with short-term national interests.

Enhanced Security Commitments

From an international relations leadership perspective, security guarantees must be both credible and visible, and hegemonic powers hold obligatory responsibility for security as a public good. Under this requirement, it follows that the U.S. must provide active leadership in supporting alliances like NATO, global economic stability through management of financial institutions, enforcing open markets and promoting free trade around the world, and enforcing stabilizing international norms through institutions dedicated to promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.¹⁵

In return, member states expect to suffer certain costs and constraints associated with U.S.-directed leadership under the premise that the benefits outweigh the costs. The U.S. commitment to Taiwan, for example, serves not only to deter Chinese aggression but also to signal to regional partners like Japan, South Korea, and Australia that American alliance commitments remain reliable despite China's growing military capabilities.¹⁶ Similarly, NATO's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine has become a test case for American willingness to bear costs in defense of the liberal international order.

Strategic Competition and Evolving Obligations

From a credible commitments perspective, a hegemonic power cannot simply demand obedience from its member states but must instead assume the burdens of leadership to uphold its commitments. As a hegemonic power, American leadership obligations include taking on a disproportionate share of the costs of maintaining the global order, including military spending, foreign aid, and support to international institutions and organizations.¹⁷ Likewise, the U.S. must continue to be seen as a credible source of global leadership while retaining the ability to uphold stabilizing global norms, while also consulting with American allies and partners on important decisions to avoid unilateral actions that undermine the alliance or alienate members.

The Costs of Leadership Failure

When the U.S. fails to meet these basic leadership obligations, it risks the same leadership failure as the crime boss who fails to take care of their "family." Specifically, the U.S. risks losing the economic, security, and influence advantages of hegemony that deliver much of

¹⁵ Keohane, 1984.

¹⁶ Hall Brands and Michael Beckley, 2021, "Washington is Preparing for the Wrong War with China: A Conflict Would Be Long and Messy," *Foreign Affairs*, 16 December, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-12-16/washington-preparing-wrong-war-china>.

¹⁷ Keohane, 1984.

America's global power. Interestingly, when the same leadership failures occur in the “racketeering” framework, the environment suffers a broad decline in stability through outbreaks in violence, personnel losses and defections, and the general decline in earning potential. Therefore, similar leadership failures at the state level result in similar foundational failures of the global world order. Like members of a crime family, allies and partners of a failing hegemon will seek alternative sources of leadership from any member of the global order capable of providing stability, security, or support.

The Crisis of American Leadership in Strategic Competition

Recent changes to America's global leadership identity are changing how the world sees America's relationship with global stability. Analysis of these changes encompasses both internal challenges within the U.S. government and its population, as well as external challenges arising from new political actors and the dynamic nature of shifting global dynamics.

Public opinion polling consistently shows a declining American appetite for global leadership responsibilities. Pew Research Center analysis from April 2021 found that the American public was “closely divided on the question of how much international engagement benefits the nation,” with only a slight majority (54%) favoring policies pursuant to international cooperation.”¹⁸

However, a Pew Research report from May 2023 noted “shifts in how Americans view their place in their world” reflecting that a majority (55%) of Americans now believe “the U.S. should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems at home.”¹⁹ This rise in domestic skepticism constrains policymakers' ability to make the long-term, outward-facing commitments that effective hegemonic leadership requires.

Institutional Erosion and the American Leadership Identity

One of the most significant modern challenges to the American leadership identity is found in the recent erosion of faith in American institutions and the increasing prominence of political polarization in American politics. As American global power increased after World War II, rising economic inequality and declining social mobility fueled resentment and disillusionment that continues to put regular citizens at odds with American elites.²⁰

Combined with the effect of algorithmic social media, this American identity has become increasingly marked by a growing distrust of government, the media, and other established

18 Mara Mordecai and Moira Fagan, 2021, “Americans' Views of Key Foreign Policy Goals Depend on Their Attitudes Toward International Cooperation,” *Pew Research Center*, 23 April, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/23/americans-views-of-key-foreign-policy-goals-depend-on-their-attitudes-toward-international-cooperation/>.

19 Jacob Poushter, Moira Fagan, Sneha Gubbala, and Jordan Lippert, 2023, “Americans Hold Positive Feelings Toward NATO and Ukraine, See Russia as an Enemy,” *Pew Research Center*, 10 May, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/05/10/americans-hold-positive-feelings-toward-nato-and-ukraine-see-russia-as-an-enemy/>.

20 Robert D. Putnam, 2000, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, <http://bowlingalone.com/>.

American governance institutions. With increasing internal division across the American public, it follows that America now struggles to find a shared external identity that could foster a coherent foreign policy, thus undermining the U.S. as a reliable partner, let alone as a global leader.²¹

External Credibility Challenges and Rising Leadership Alternatives

Along with internal pressures, the U.S. faces similar external challenges, including the rise of China as a significant economic and military power capable of challenging the American global hegemony.²² While the U.S. capitalized on its previous hegemonic strength in pursuing a counterterrorism-based strategy, China developed sufficient stability and strength to seriously pursue global economic expansion, infrastructure development, and military modernization with an innovative approach for projecting influence across significant gaps in American foreign policy focus: the developing world. The rise in BRICS membership from 5 to 11, with 18 states pursuing memberships, speaks to the newly established strength of China as a serious competitor to American leadership.

Now, with U.S. forces struggling with credibility following the lackluster achievements of the war on terror, coupled with weakened global institutions, many states, particularly developing states, have cause for skepticism about America's ability to lead the world order. While the U.S. appears to be shrinking from its almost century-old role in global leadership, the rise of China as a serious threat to American survivability, along with a resurgence of Russian hegemonic ambition, and continued challenges of instability and violence in the Middle East following the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, pose existential threats to the U.S.-led world order.

Strategic Competition Through the Protection Racket Lens: China's Alternative Model

China's Competing Value Proposition

China's approach to international leadership deliberately contrasts with traditional American methods. Where U.S. engagement often includes political conditionality focused on governance reforms and human rights improvements, Chinese partnerships emphasize non-interference and respect for sovereignty. For authoritarian regimes and developing nations frustrated with Western conditions, this represents an attractive alternative model of international cooperation.²³

21 Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, 2012, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*, Basic Books, https://www.law.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/upload_documents/It's-Even-Worse-Than-it%20Looks.pdf.

22 Graham Allison, 2017, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/destined-war-can-america-and-china-escape-thucydides-trap>.

23 William Norris, 2016, *Economic statecraft as a tool of peacemaking? China's relationships with India and Russia*, University of Michigan Press,

The expansion of BRICS membership illustrates this dynamic. The organization has grown from five founding members in 2009 to eleven full members in 2025, with eighteen additional states seeking membership. This growth reflects not merely economic attraction but also the political appeal of an international organization that explicitly positions itself as an alternative to Western-dominated institutions.

Infrastructure and Economic Statecraft

China's Belt and Road Initiative represents the most comprehensive challenge to American economic leadership since the Marshall Plan. As of 2025, China has committed over \$2.5 trillion to overseas investment and construction projects across 144 countries, creating new patterns of economic dependence and political influence.²⁴ These investments often provide immediate, visible benefits to recipient nations while creating long-term strategic advantages for China.

Military and Security Alternatives

China has also begun offering security partnerships that compete with American alliance structures. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China's military base in Djibouti, and growing arms sales to U.S. partners in the Middle East and Africa all represent challenges to American security leadership. While these initiatives remain limited compared to U.S. global military presence, they demonstrate China's growing capacity to provide alternative sources of security cooperation.

Reclaiming American Global Leadership: Understanding the Power of Connectedness

Renewing Alliance Commitments

The protection racket framework suggests that effective leadership in strategic competition requires demonstrating superior value to potential members. For the U.S. government, this means relying less on leadership-through-force and embracing more relational and servant styles of leadership – those styles marked by the pursuit of global connectedness where the U.S. demonstrates global leadership through increasing and revitalizing alliance relationships, sharing technology cooperation, and ensuring economic integration makes global communities better off under American leadership than under our authoritarian global competitors.²⁵

<https://scholars.library.tamu.edu/vivo/display/n357203SE/Documents/View%20All>.

²⁴ “China Global Investment Tracker,” *American Enterprise Institute*, 2025, n.d., <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>.

²⁵ Joseph E. Long, 2019, *The Guerrilla Leader Theory: Maximizing the Strategic Impact of Leading with Competence and Connectedness in Counterinsurgency Operations*, ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/openview/bee80767747d77d7c2018fa6ae6f7866/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

Understanding *Connectedness* in Alliances

To demonstrate the leadership skills necessary for success within the protection racket framework, American political leaders must recognize that their leadership styles carry over from the individual to the national level when they speak on behalf of the nation. In this role, the protection racket framework serves as a reminder that just as crime bosses must expend resources to support their subordinates in competition with other crime families, law enforcement, and society, so too must national-level leaders recognize the need to expend American resources in supporting and sustaining the global institutions that place the U.S. in its international leadership role.

For the crime boss, autocratic and totalitarian leadership behavior might be a small part of the boss's leadership style. However, successful bosses recognize that relational and servant leadership styles are also necessary for sustaining an equilibrium where the boss remains in charge over time. In such cases, an over-reliance on autocratic styles could lead to disgruntled members defecting from the organization in favor of better opportunities in other crime families. Likewise, failing to support members who are in conflict with other criminal organizations or who are in legal trouble could not only reduce the organization's ability to prosper, but such displays of instability risk signaling to other members and other organizations that the organization is in decline.

To combat the risk of defection and decline in the "protection racket model," crime leaders foster a sense of "connectedness" among their membership to develop ties of loyalty that better withstand defection.²⁶ Similarly, American leaders at the global level must recognize they also must build and sustain connectedness with allies and partners to prevent defection, losses of power, and shifts in the very global order that placed the U.S. in its position of influence following World War II.

Connectedness in Relevant Leadership Literature

By examining the leadership challenges inherent to leading partner forces and micro-level allies during insurgency-related combat operations, a lens of leading through "connectedness" provides a useful tool for conceptualizing highly complex leadership conditions found during guerrilla warfare. By also framing population-centric conflict environments that are often the sole domain of SOF using a leadership lens, the Guerrilla Leadership Model highlights behavioral changes that yield positive leadership outcomes when tested by empirical data.²⁷

By raising some of the foundational aspects of insurgency theory from the substate-level to the international stage, other academic arguments suggest that leadership behavior that overcomes population-centric challenges at the state level remains similar to those facing the U.S. at the global level. In noting that military strength in complex population-centric conflicts is often "positively counter-productive,"²⁸ other scholars recognize that the soft

²⁶ Long, 2019.

²⁷ Long, 2019.

²⁸ Andrew Mack, 1975, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics*, vol. 27, no. 2, p. 177, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009880?seq=1> .

power and indirect nature of weak actors has led to victory “with increasing frequency over time.”²⁹ This observation serves as a reminder that global leadership is about more than strength; it is about the leader’s ability to provide for the utilitarian needs of the people or suffer losses of support and significant shifts in local power dynamics.

Similarly, the thought experiment of the “liberator’s dilemma” highlights how utilitarian leadership dynamics gradually encourage populations to eschew military support from a liberating force in favor of recommitting to the previously repressive incumbent regime.³⁰ Likewise, the rise of “super-empowered populations” in recent population-centric conflicts increasingly bolsters the capabilities of micro-level populations with easily accessible advanced technology and social media able to grind powerful military formations to a halt.³¹ From the lens of the protection racket, this makes sense. Just as crime bosses who fail to sustain connectedness with their members recognize the knowledge, skills, and abilities they possess will be desired by competing organizations, American political leaders must respect the power that super-empowered populations have from our own competitors. An over-reliance on force will dissolve connectedness and speed defection toward competitive organizations willing to provide more stable leadership.

Connectedness in American Global Leadership

Just as connectedness matters at the sub-state level during population-centric conflicts, the logic of protection racket leaders resonates at the global state level. Sustaining connectedness in population-centric conflict requires military leaders to be motivated to shape a collective identity, engage in collaborative planning, maximize U.S.-partner integration, and capitalize positively on shared cultural experiences during extended combat operations. As a leadership style rooted in relational and servant styles, building and sustaining American connectedness, even when seemingly costly in terms of economic and military expenditures, will counter the rise in global support of the emerging BRICS alliance network away from NATO and the post-World War II global institutions.

By failing to meet the leadership obligations reflected in Tilly’s observations about organized crime, the U.S. is offering a significant advantage to China’s emerging BRICS network. Only by recognizing America’s leadership challenges as both domestically and globally relevant can we see that American political leadership must reforge a coherent global leadership strategy that leverages the power of connection from the population-centric battlefield to find similar results in leading the global community in developing and following American liberal values. Failure to do so risks the continued decline of traditional

29 Ivan Arreguin-Toft, 2001, “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict,” *International Security*, vol. 26, no. 1, p. 96, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/how-weak-win-wars-theory-asymmetric-conflict-0>.

30 Joseph E. Long, 2023a, “The Liberator’s Dilemma: The Paradox of American Leadership,” *Inter-Populum: The Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations*, vol. 1, no. 2, <https://interpopulum.org/the-liberators-dilemma-the-paradox-of-american-leadership>.

31 Joseph E. Long, 2023b, “The Future of Conflict: How Super-Empowered Populations Will Change Warfare,” *Irregular Warfare Initiative*, 1 June, <https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/the-future-of-conflict-how-super-empowered-populations-will-change-warfare/>.

international institutions in favor of emerging BRICS-based support for America's pacing threat.

Conclusion

Charles Tilly's protection racket framework provides essential insights into the leadership obligations facing the United States in the current era of strategic competition. Just as successful crime bosses must provide tangible benefits to maintain organizational loyalty, effective hegemonic leadership requires sustained investment in alliance relationships, institutional cooperation, and global public goods provision.

A deeper view of Tilly's observations offers a unique leadership lens for understanding America's seemingly counter-intuitive role in global leadership as a clarion call to reawakening American obligations to provide coherent, globally focused leadership for a future-oriented, U.S.-led world order. Although the U.S.-led world order launched America into superpower status during the post-World War II and Cold War eras, weakened global leadership following decades of counterterrorism during an era of rapidly rising Chinese power has jeopardized the institutional stability that placed America at the apex of global leadership.

Although the temptation toward isolationism can be understandable, given the perceived burdens of global leadership, the reality is that a global order led by China rather than the U.S. would carry catastrophic consequences for American economic and security interests. To prevent the continued rise of Chinese power and the move toward global hegemony, America should forgo calls toward isolationism and instead reinvest in global institutions that leadership-through-connectedness delivered in the 20th century.

However, the United States retains significant advantages in this competition. American democratic institutions, innovative economy, and alliance networks provide foundations for leadership that authoritarian alternatives cannot fully replicate. The challenge lies in translating these structural advantages into effective policy responses that demonstrate superior value to potential partners.

The policy recommendations outlined in this analysis—enhanced alliance commitments, institutional reform, competitive economic partnerships, and strengthened security cooperation—provide a framework for reclaiming American leadership advantage. However, their implementation requires overcoming significant domestic political constraints and resource limitations.

Ultimately, the success of American leadership in strategic competition depends on recognizing that hegemony is not a passive state but an active process requiring sustained investment and adaptation. As Tilly's framework suggests, leadership organizations that fail to evolve and provide superior benefits to their members face inevitable decline and replacement. In an era where China actively competes for international leadership, American policymakers must embrace the full obligations of hegemony and recommit to global leadership.

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