U.S. Hegemony in the Polycrisis: Global Complexity and the Politics of Adaptation

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Abstract: *This article examines how the contemporary polycrisis (the entanglement of economic, geopolitical, and ecological disruptions) reshapes the structural conditions under which U.S. hegemony can be sustained. Drawing on complexity theory and second image reversed theory, it argues that the challenge confronting the U.S. is not a simple decline in power but a transformation of the environment in which leadership operates. The polycrisis generates nonlinear interactions across global systems, producing feedback effects that no single actor can control. As a result, the material and ideational foundations of hegemonic stability have become increasingly fragile. At the same time, the complexity of governing interdependent crises amplifies domestic political pressures, rendering policymaking more volatile and reactive. The article develops the concept of hegemonic complexity to capture how systemic interdependence and internal polarization combine to undermine coherent foreign and economic policy. Two empirical cases illustrate these dynamics: the prolonged 2023–24 congressional struggle over Ukraine aid, and the oscillation between the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022 and the "Big Beautiful Bill" (BBB) introduced under the subsequent administration. Both cases show how U.S. policymakers attempt to reduce global complexity through targeted interventions that are increasingly susceptible to partisan conflict and institutional fragility. The article concludes that U.S. hegemony endures but with diminishing coherence, reflecting a broader shift from the construction of liberal order to the episodic management of disorder in an era of global complexity.*

Keywords: *Polycrisis; complexity; adaptive hegemony; U.S. foreign policy; domestic polarization; global governance.*

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Introduction

The early twenty-first century marks a critical juncture in global politics.[1] The U.S. remains the most powerful state in military, economic, and technological terms, yet its hegemonic role appears increasingly uncertain.[2] A series of overlapping disruptions - the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine,

the accelerating climate crisis, and intensifying democratic backsliding - have eroded the foundations of the liberal international order that the U.S. once underpinned.[3] What distinguishes this moment from earlier crises of American leadership is not simply the magnitude of challenges but their interconnectedness. We are living in an era of polycrisis: a condition in which multiple, interdependent crises interact across domains, amplifying one another's effects and undermining the very conditions under which U.S. hegemony can be sustained.[4]

The concept of polycrisis, introduced by Edgar Morin and Anne-Brigitte Kern and revived by scholars such as Michael Lawrence, Eric Helleiner, and others describes a world in which economic, ecological, and geopolitical disruptions are entangled through dense interdependencies and feedback loops.[5] Crises in one domain (financial instability, climate disruption, or conflict) cascade across others, creating a state of continuous turbulence in which global order itself becomes adaptive but unstable.[6] Empirically, this interconnection is visible in the concurrent rise of geopolitical risk, trade uncertainty, and military confrontation since the mid-2010s. These trends point not merely to growing volatility but to a structural condition in which crises interact and accelerate one another.[7]

This article advances two arguments. First, the polycrisis has altered the conditions of U.S. hegemony. It does not simply challenge American power; it reshapes the systemic context in which it operates. The postwar liberal order's earlier stability rested on relatively separable domains of governance, economic, security, and ecological, that could be managed through institutions, norms, and alliances.[8] In contrast, the polycrisis challenges and obscures these boundaries. As global governance has become complex, crises interact through shared infrastructures, supply chains, and information networks, producing feedbacks that no single actor can control.[9] U.S. hegemony, which historically depended on providing stability and public goods within these discrete domains, becomes harder to maintain as governance demands rise and systemic uncertainty increases. In this sense, the challenge is not only geopolitical competition but the erosion of the structural conditions that once made U.S. rule-setting and order maintenance viable.

Second the polycrisis destabilizes democratic governance itself by raising the complexity of policy responses. Interdependent crises require simultaneous coordination across multiple issue areas, yet domestic political systems are ill-equipped to meet these demands. Following Peter Gourevitch's "second image reversed" theory, systemic pressures reshape domestic alignments and institutions, which then constrain foreign policy.[10] Global instability reverberates back into the U.S., reshaping its internal political structures and constraining its external behavior. Economic dislocation, migration pressures, and cultural

polarization feed populist mobilizations that erode elite consensus on America's global role. The result is a feedback loop between domestic fragmentation and international disorder. In short, U.S. power persists, but with diminishing control and increasing hegemonic fragility under conditions of complexity.

The empirical illustrations explored in this article - the U.S. response to the war in Ukraine and the contrasting trajectories of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the "Big Beautiful Bill" (BBB) under the Trump administration - illuminate these dynamics in practice. Both cases reveal how a powerful hegemon struggles to formulate effective and consistent policy responses under polycrisis conditions. In the Ukraine case, U.S. leadership through NATO and sanctions demonstrates material dominance but also exposes the limits of coherence under partisan polarization and resource fatigue. In the domain of climate and industrial policy, the contrast between the IRA and the BBB highlights the volatility of U.S. governance and the difficulty of sustaining complex, long-term strategies across administrations. Across both cases, policymakers attempt to reduce global complexity (through security guarantees, sanctions, subsidies, or strategic industrial policy) but these interventions repeatedly encounter domestic contestation that undermines coherence and sustainability.

Complexity theory helps explain why these patterns emerge. It highlights that in densely interconnected systems, stability cannot be imposed hierarchically but must be continuously maintained through coordination, learning, and adaptability across networks.[11] When applied to U.S. leadership, this perspective shifts the analytical focus from debates over hegemonic "decline" versus "persistence" to the structural transformation of hegemony itself: from an order-anchoring, public-goods-providing system to one characterized by fragility, recursive feedback, and governing overload. The U.S. no longer operates as the architect of a coherent liberal order. Rather, it increasingly acts as a crisis-driven responder whose ability to govern is constrained by the very complexity it seeks to manage.

The article proceeds as follows. Section II develops the theoretical framework by linking polycrisis and complexity to changing conditions of hegemony. Section III examines how these conditions reshape U.S. hegemonic practices by interacting with domestic polarization and institutional fragmentation. Section IV provides empirical illustrations from U.S. foreign, climate, and industrial policy, showing how governing complexity manifests in practice. Section V concludes by outlining the implications of polycrisis for the future of U.S. leadership and global order.

Theoretical Framework: From Crises to Complex Systems

Understanding U.S. hegemony in the twenty-first century requires moving beyond conventional accounts of order, power, and hierarchy. The dynamics of global politics have become shaped by interaction effects between multiple crises unfolding across economic, political, and ecological systems. The result is a system of complex interdependence, in which shocks travel rapidly between domains, amplifying one another's effects and producing outcomes that no single actor (hegemon or otherwise) can fully control.[12] Under these conditions, the core assumptions that once sustained hegemonic stability theory no longer hold.

Traditional theories of hegemonic stability assumed that a dominant power could provide public goods, maintain open markets, and enforce rules.[13] After 1945, U.S. leadership largely fit this model: economic preponderance, institutional design, and ideological legitimacy allowed the U.S. to stabilize the international order through hierarchical forms of governance. Yet the world that enabled this model has changed profoundly. Globalization, technological acceleration, and financial integration have produced a system that is densely connected, nonlinear, and difficult to steer. Order now emerges less from centralized control than from horizontal coordination across multiple actors, both public and private.[14]

Complexity theory provides a vocabulary for describing this transformation. As Bousquet and Geyer argue, complexity challenges linear causality and reductionist understandings of global politics.[15] Global systems exhibit emergent properties that arise from the interaction of many components without central direction. Winston likewise conceptualizes norms and institutions as emergent outcomes of complex adaptive systems, where stability is not fixed but constantly renegotiated through feedback, learning, and reorganization.[16] This perspective does not imply that all states are affected equally; it highlights that the terms of leadership have changed, reducing the ability of even a hegemon to impose coherent, durable solutions.

The concept of polycrisis extends this understanding by emphasizing how crises become causally entangled across domains. Helleiner and Lawrence et al. describe polycrisis not as the mere simultaneity of shocks but as structural coupling: economic, geopolitical, and ecological disruptions interact through shared infrastructures and institutions, creating cascading effects that overwhelm traditional modes of governance.[17] The polycrisis is therefore not simply a collection of simultaneous shocks but a condition in which crisis management becomes increasingly reactive and uncertain.[18]

Davies provides a historical reminder that periods of crisis entanglement have

occurred before, but the present moment differs in both scale and tempo: crises now unfold globally and with unprecedented simultaneity.[19] This density of interconnection produces governance overload, straining institutional capacities for coordination. For the U.S., this means that hegemonic leadership becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, not because the material foundations of power have disappeared, but because the system no longer aligns with the premises of hegemonic control.

In this sense, polycrisis is not an episodic anomaly but the structural backdrop of contemporary international politics. It creates a condition of hegemonic fragility under complexity: U.S. leadership persists, yet the coherence and stability that once underpinned it are harder to maintain. The U.S. retains unmatched capacities to mobilize coalitions, set agendas, and shape markets, but the interdependence of crises undermines its ability to provide predictable, long-term order. What declines is not U.S. power per se, but the sustainability of hegemonic stability - materially (through budgetary strain, supply chain vulnerability, and security commitments) and ideationally (through declining legitimacy and domestic contestation).

Gourevitch's second image reversed framework helps explain how systemic complexity transforms domestic politics.[20] Economic globalization has reshaped domestic coalitions, intensifying cleavages between sectors, regions, and social groups. Trade disruptions, technological displacement, and migration flows have sharpened distributive conflicts within advanced democracies. In the U.S., these pressures coincide with deep partisan polarization and declining consensus on global engagement.[21] Populist movements frame external interdependence as a threat, linking international commitments to domestic grievances.[22]

Importantly, this feedback loop is not entirely new, domestic politics have always influenced U.S. foreign policy. What is new under polycrisis is the intensity, speed, and systemic reach of feedback effects. International disruptions now reverberate domestically more quickly and more widely, while domestic political fragmentation more immediately constrains external action. This produces a heightened volatility in foreign policy decision-making, not because the U.S. has abandoned leadership, but because sustaining it has become more politically and institutionally costly.[23]

These dynamics link the systemic and domestic levels through recursive feedback: global turbulence exacerbates domestic fragmentation, which reduces governing capacity, which in turn limits the ability to manage global crises effectively. Hegemonic fragility is therefore not a sign of straightforward decline; it is a consequence of governing in a system where complexity has outpaced the organizational and political capacities required for coherent

strategic action.[24]

For these reasons, the primary challenge facing U.S. hegemony in the polycrisis era is not adaptation in the sense of strategic adjustment, but the declining sustainability of hegemonic governance. As crises increasingly cross domain boundaries, policy responses become more complex, more politicized, and more prone to reversal. This transforms U.S. leadership from a project of long-term order-building into one of short-term crisis management, an orientation that creates its own contradictions and further undermines coherence.

The following section develops these implications more explicitly by examining how polycrisis conditions reshape the substantive practice of U.S. hegemony and expose the systemic and domestic constraints that complicate its sustainability.

U.S. Hegemony under Polycrisis Conditions

The analytical framework developed above allows for a different reading of U.S. hegemony under the systemic conditions of the twenty-first century. Traditional accounts conceive hegemony as the relatively stable provision of order by a dominant state, grounded in material preponderance, institutional design, and the capacity to supply public goods. The postwar U.S. largely operated under such conditions: governance domains were sufficiently separable, crises were more contained, and global interdependence, although expanding, did not yet produce the deeply recursive dynamics observed today.[25] By contrast, the contemporary polycrisis has altered the structural environment in which U.S. leadership functions. It does not eliminate American power, but it renders hegemonic stability increasingly difficult to sustain.

The defining change is not simply the proliferation of crises but their interdependence. Globalization, technological acceleration, and financial integration have produced a system in which shocks propagate rapidly across economic, political, and ecological domains. The resulting environment is one of coordination overload: the demands for strategic consistency are increasing, while the capacity to maintain coherence is diminishing. In this context, hegemony no longer rests on directive leadership but on the far more fragile ability to prevent systemic breakdown. Authority remains asymmetrical, yet its exercise becomes more contested, reactive, and vulnerable to contradiction.

Two transformations illustrate this shift. First, the temporal logic of leadership has changed. During the mid-twentieth century, the U.S. exercised influence through long-term institutional projects (Bretton Woods, NATO, global trade regimes) that presumed a certain stability in the geopolitical environment.

Today's crises, however, emerge unpredictably and interact nonlinearly. Policy responses must therefore be formulated rapidly and under uncertainty. The cumulative effect is a narrowing of strategic horizons: crisis response crowds out long-term governance, undermining the consistency on which hegemonic authority depends.

Second, the spatial logic of governance has changed. Authority is increasingly distributed across networks of states, firms, and technological infrastructures. The U.S. still occupies a central position in these networks, but it no longer controls them. Efforts to stabilize one domain—for instance, through sanctions, export controls, or industrial subsidies, generate destabilizing consequences elsewhere. This recursive dynamic exemplifies the unsustainability of hegemonic leadership under polycrisis conditions: intervention becomes necessary but systematically produces new strains.[26]

These pressures translate into the domestic arena through mechanisms identified by Gourevitch's second image reversed. Global turbulence generates domestic distributional conflict, ideological polarization, and institutional blockage, factors that in turn weaken the state's ability to respond coherently to external shocks. Three processes are particularly consequential. First, economic interdependence intensifies domestic conflict over trade, industrial restructuring, and redistribution. The uneven effects of globalization have generated new cleavages between sectors and regions, fostering polarization and eroding the broad coalitions that once supported liberal internationalism.

Second, the digitalization of politics amplifies ideological conflict. International crises (wars, pandemics, climate shocks) become domestically salient within hours, mobilizing partisan identities and narrowing the space for bipartisan decision-making. Foreign policy issues that once commanded cross-party support, such as support for NATO or climate cooperation, now map onto polarized domestic identities.

Third, institutional fragmentation magnifies these pressures. The U.S. political system contains numerous veto points, and the intensification of partisanship has made procedural tools such as filibusters, holds, and motions to vacate instruments of ideological confrontation. As a result, external shocks increasingly produce domestic paralysis rather than coordinated response.

These feedback effects undermine the material and ideational foundations of U.S. hegemony. Materially, sustained leadership requires the ability to mobilize resources, coordinate allies, and implement long-term strategies (capacities that become strained when domestic politics is volatile). Ideationally, hegemony depends on credibility, predictability, and the perception of strategic competence. Polycrisis erodes all three. The U.S. remains central to global

governance because of its economic weight, technological capacity, and alliance networks. Yet its ability to organize international responses has become less reliable, more contested, and more episodic.

Under polycrisis conditions, therefore, U.S. hegemony persists but becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Leadership no longer resembles a stable architecture of order but instead approximates a pattern of governance instability, in which the system relies on the U.S. but cannot rely on its consistency. Allies adjust to American unpredictability; rivals exploit domestic fragmentation; and global challenges accumulate faster than coherent responses can be formulated.

The empirical cases examined below illustrate these dynamics. They show how the U.S. attempts to manage global interdependence through targeted interventions, yet how these interventions are repeatedly disrupted, politicized, or reversed due to domestic contestation. As such, they illuminate the central argument of this article: polycrisis makes hegemonic stability less sustainable and governing increasingly unstable.

Empirical Illustrations: Adaptive Hegemony in Practice

The effects of the polycrisis on U.S. leadership become clearest where external shocks intersect with domestic fragmentation. In such settings, even a materially preponderant state struggles to sustain coherent policy because the complexity of global crises magnifies the demands on governance while internal polarization constrains the capacity to respond. Two cases illustrate these dynamics. The first concerns the protracted congressional struggle over Ukraine aid between 2023 and 2024, which exposed how institutional volatility and partisan conflict weaken strategic coherence. The second examines the contrasting trajectories of U.S. climate and industrial policy under the IRA of 2022 and the subsequent BBB, demonstrating how long-term governance becomes increasingly unstable under polycrisis conditions. Both cases show how U.S. policymakers attempt to reduce global complexity through targeted interventions, yet these efforts remain deeply vulnerable to domestic contestation and cycles of partisan reversal.

Congressional Turmoil and the Limits of Coherence: U.S. Aid to Ukraine (2023–2024)

The U.S. response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine initially appeared to reaffirm the structural endurance of American leadership. Washington coordinated sanctions, mobilized NATO, and provided substantial military and financial assistance. Yet as the war continued, the sustainability of this leadership became a function not of material capability but of domestic political cohesion.

When Republicans assumed control of the House of Representatives in January 2023, their narrow majority heightened procedural fragility. Speaker Kevin McCarthy secured his position only after agreeing to rules that allowed a single member to trigger a motion to vacate the chair, effectively enabling internal dissidents to depose him. This concession institutionalized instability and ensured that any major vote (on spending, border policy, or Ukraine) could ignite a leadership crisis.

By late 2023, a government shutdown loomed. Hard-right legislators demanded deep spending cuts and stringent border provisions as conditions for passing appropriations bills. They also opposed further aid to Ukraine, reframing foreign assistance as a diversion of resources from domestic priorities. To avert a shutdown, McCarthy passed a short-term continuing resolution with Democratic support. He excluded Ukraine aid to secure the votes necessary for passage. The move avoided immediate fiscal disruption but triggered his removal, making him the first Speaker in U.S. history to be ousted through an intra-party revolt.[27]

The weeks of paralysis that followed brought foreign-policy decision-making to a standstill.[28] Only at the end of October 2023 did Republicans rally behind a new Speaker, Mike Johnson, who inherited the same structural dilemma: foreign-policy commitments had become embedded within domestic ideological disputes.[29] The Republican leadership insisted that Ukraine assistance be tied to U.S. border policy, making international commitments contingent on unrelated domestic issues. Under pressure from former President Trump, House and Senate Republicans rejected a bipartisan Senate compromise that paired Ukraine aid with asylum reforms in February 2024.

It was not until April 2024 (after months of legislative deadlock, allied concern, and reputational damage) that Congress passed a new "national security package" providing $61 billion in aid to Ukraine, alongside support for Israel, Taiwan, and Indo-Pacific partners. While Johnson's decision ultimately secured the passage of the package, it provoked another internal revolt, triggering a second motion to vacate from the party's right flank. This time, Democrats voted to protect Johnson, signaling that bipartisan coalitions had become necessary to maintain basic functionality in the House.[30]

This episode illustrates the growing difficulty of sustaining hegemonic commitments under polycrisis conditions. The problem was not the U.S. capacity to support Ukraine (resources, military capabilities, and coalition structures were readily available) but the inability to translate that capacity into timely and predictable policy. The crisis revealed three structural constraints. First, domestic polarization transformed a core geopolitical issue into a partisan symbol. Rather than treating Ukraine as a strategic question linked to Euro-

pean security, legislators increasingly debated it through the lens of domestic ideological conflict, immigration politics, and presidential campaigning. Second, institutional fragility allowed small factions to wield outsized influence. The procedural tools available to individual members or small groups, motions to vacate, procedural blockades, and threats of shutdown, turned foreign policy into a hostage of internal party bargaining. Third, the temporal logic of crisis governance produced short-termism. Decisions were reactive, shaped by immediate political incentives rather than long-term strategic planning. The polycrisis environment amplified this dynamic: global shocks fed into domestic polarization, which then fed back into policy instability.

In systemic terms, the Ukraine episode demonstrates that even where the U.S. possesses the material means and international legitimacy to act, the ability to sustain leadership depends increasingly on domestic political stability. The fragility of congressional governance, the partisan reframing of external threats, and the cyclical nature of internal conflict all undermine strategic reliability. For allies and adversaries alike, U.S. hegemony thus remains indispensable but increasingly unpredictable.

Climate Policy, Industrial Strategy, and the Politics of Volatility

A similar dynamic is visible in the field of climate and industrial policy, where the U.S. faces the simultaneous pressures of decarbonization, technological competition, energy security, and domestic economic restructuring. These challenges exemplify how the polycrisis forces policymakers to confront interacting risks across ecological, economic, and geopolitical domains, and how attempts to govern this complexity become unstable under polarized political conditions.[31]

The IRA of 2022 represented the most comprehensive effort in decades to respond to these intertwined pressures. Rather than treating climate, industrial, and social policy as separate issues, the IRA deliberately bundled them into a single framework. Its design responded to the systemic nature of contemporary crises: tax incentives for renewables were linked to supply-chain resilience, subsidies for clean technologies were tied to domestic manufacturing provisions, and climate goals were embedded within broader concerns about U.S.–China technological rivalry. This integration reflected a governing logic attuned to polycrisis conditions. The IRA acknowledged that energy transition, economic competitiveness, and security vulnerabilities cannot be separated without generating new risks elsewhere. It attempted to reduce global complexity not by narrowing the scope of policy, but by aligning multiple objectives within one legislative architecture.

Yet precisely because the IRA sought to manage interconnected crises through

an expansive and multi-pronged approach, it became acutely exposed to domestic politicization. Its passage through budget reconciliation meant that it rested on a narrow partisan majority and lacked institutional insulation. The same features that made the IRA an attempt to govern complexity made it a focal point of ideological conflict. For conservatives, the IRA symbolized fiscal excess and government intervention; for some progressives, it was insufficiently transformative. The result was a policy innovation structurally vulnerable to reversal.

This vulnerability materialized rapidly with the introduction of the BBB under the subsequent administration. The BBB reversed core elements of the IRA and recast U.S. climate and industrial strategy around fossil fuel expansion, deregulation, and narrowly defined energy security. Whereas the IRA embraced systemic interdependence (treating climate, industry, and geopolitics as mutually reinforcing) the BBB reverted to siloed, short-term policymaking. It decoupled energy policy from industrial transformation, sidelined climate objectives, and returned to an extractive model framed through the rhetoric of "energy dominance." Global interdependence was no longer interpreted as a structural condition requiring coordination, but as a vulnerability best addressed by insulating the U.S. from external pressures.

This shift was not merely a partisan disagreement but a reflection of the governing instability produced by the polycrisis. The complexity of climate and industrial transformation requires long-term planning, cross-sectoral coordination, and stable expectations for industries and international partners. Yet such strategies are difficult to sustain in a polarized political environment where each electoral cycle triggers sharp reversals. The oscillation from IRA to BBB makes clear that U.S. climate and industrial strategy does not evolve along a coherent trajectory; instead, it swings between attempts to confront systemic complexity and attempts to simplify it through retrenchment.[33]

Viewed through the lens of polycrisis, this oscillation reveals deeper constraints on U.S. hegemonic stability. The ecological transition is not simply a domestic policy area, it has become a central dimension of geopolitical competition, global economic governance, and technological leadership. In this context, volatility in U.S. climate policy undermines its capacity to shape global rules and expectations. Allies must hedge against abrupt shifts, while rivals exploit policy incoherence. The IRA briefly positioned the U.S. as a potential leader in coordinating the global green transition, but the BBB quickly signaled that such leadership is contingent and reversible.

More broadly, the rapid policy turn illustrates how the complexity of modern governance exposes the fragility of U.S. institutional capacity. Efforts to manage interconnected risks require durable coalitions and cross-institutional

alignment, yet polarization erodes both. Long-term strategies are continually disrupted by short-term electoral incentives, preventing the accumulation of institutional learning and undermining predictability. In this sense, the IRA–BBB sequence exemplifies how polycrisis conditions interact with domestic fragmentation to produce volatility that weakens the sustainability of U.S. leadership.

Comparison

The Ukraine and IRA–BBB cases differ in policy domain but converge analytically. Each demonstrates how the U.S. remains structurally central to global crisis responses, yet both reveal the growing fragility of the domestic political foundations on which such leadership rests. In Ukraine, the issue at stake concerned the credibility of U.S. security commitments; in climate and industrial policy, it concerned the capacity to sustain long-term strategic investment. In each case, efforts to govern interdependence were filtered through the constraints of polarization, procedural fragmentation, and partisan volatility.

The Ukraine aid struggle shows how external crises are refracted through domestic ideological conflict. What began as a broadly supported response to an act of interstate aggression quickly became entangled with internal battles over immigration, fiscal priorities, and party leadership. The resulting delays and leadership crises did not reflect a material inability to support Ukraine but a diminishing capacity to translate systemic imperatives into coherent policy. Allies witnessed that U.S. commitments had become contingent on unstable congressional dynamics and narrower partisan battles.

The IRA–BBB oscillation underscores a similar dynamic in a different domain. The IRA attempted to integrate climate action, industrial strategy, and geopolitical risk management into a single framework, an effort to govern complexity by building institutional linkages across policy fields. Its rapid reversal under the BBB revealed how vulnerable such integrated approaches are to shifts in partisan control. Whereas the Ukraine case illustrated how polarization delays crisis response, the IRA–BBB cycle illustrated how polarization fragments long-term strategy. In both instances, the central problem was not a lack of resources or international leverage but the erosion of continuity and the deepening politicization of global policy domains.

Taken together, these cases show that U.S. hegemony persists in terms of material capability, alliance networks, and agenda-setting power. Yet they also reveal a narrowing capacity to sustain coherent leadership under polycrisis conditions. The U.S. remains indispensable to global governance, but increasingly struggles to provide stability in a sustained or predictable manner. What emerges is not a hegemon in decline so much as a hegemon operating under

conditions that systematically undermine the coherence of its leadership: a world in which interdependence magnifies domestic conflicts, and domestic conflicts erode the reliability of international commitments. The dual nature of contemporary U.S. power (enduring centrality coupled with diminishing coherence) captures the core tension of hegemonic complexity under polycrisis conditions.

Conclusion: Hegemony in an Age of Complexity

The contemporary global order is defined less by the decline of American power than by the transformation of the environment in which that power is exercised. The convergence of economic, geopolitical, and ecological disruptions has produced a persistent polycrisis that alters the structural conditions of international politics. In this environment, U.S. hegemony continues to matter, but the foundations that once sustained it (clear domains of governance, predictable institutional settings, and broad domestic consensus) have eroded.

This article has advanced two central claims. First, polycrisis makes hegemonic stability materially and ideationally more difficult to sustain. The interconnection of crises across economic, ecological, and security domains creates nonlinear, recursive challenges that no single actor can control. The U.S. still possesses unmatched military, financial, and technological capacities, but it must now operate within a system in which crises interact and cascade faster than policy instruments can respond. Leadership persists, yet the ability to transform capabilities into stable order is diminished.

Second, polycrisis makes governing increasingly unstable because the complexity of policy responses intensifies precisely as domestic political coherence deteriorates. Gourevitch's second image reversed dynamic is more pronounced under today's conditions: global turbulence shapes domestic alignments, while domestic polarization constrains international action. The feedback loop between systemic interdependence and domestic fragmentation produces institutional strain, short-term policymaking, and inconsistency in foreign and economic policy.

The empirical cases illustrate these dynamics. The congressional struggle over Ukraine aid revealed how institutional fragility and partisan competition undermine the reliability of U.S. commitments, even when strategic interests are widely acknowledged. The oscillation between the IRA and the subsequent BBB demonstrated how efforts to govern complex global challenges are exposed to abrupt reversal. In both cases, U.S. policymakers attempted to reduce or manage global complexity, but these interventions became entangled in polarized domestic politics. The result was not an absence of capacity but a

persistent deficit in coherence.

The picture that emerges is one of hegemonic complexity: a form of leadership that endures, but under conditions that render its expression more fragmented, reactive, and politically contested. The U.S. remains indispensable to global governance, no other actor can orchestrate large coalitions, mobilize financial power, or set regulatory standards to the same degree. Yet its ability to provide stable expectations to partners and rivals is increasingly compromised by domestic volatility and the density of global interdependence.

The implications extend beyond the U.S. experience. As global systems become more tightly coupled and prone to cascading crises, all major powers confront the limits of linear planning and centralized control. Purposeful action requires navigating complex feedback loops rather than imposing order upon them. For allies, this means relying on a hegemon that is powerful but unpredictable; for scholars, it means rethinking analytical categories that assume stability, hierarchy, or clear separation between domestic and international politics.

Ultimately, the U.S. is not experiencing hegemonic decline in the conventional sense but a shift toward a more uncertain and fragile mode of leadership. The ability to mobilize resources and shape global agendas persists, yet the coherence required to sustain long-term strategies often falters. Hegemony today is exercised less through the construction of durable order and more through the management of disorder, an expression of power conditioned by the complexity of the polycrisis itself.

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