PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION UPSC 2021 · 15 marks

Critically examine the decline of the United States of America as a hegemon and its implications for the changing international political order.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — *how the answer moves*

INTRO ROUTES

R1 hegemony = material dominance + consent → **Gramsci**: leadership by consent vs by force → verdict staked: decline real but partial → consent weakens faster than capability

R2 the peak was short (1989 → 2007-09 crash) → **Gilpin's** fragile pillars → what cracked first is legitimacy, not capability

BODY FLOW

primacy built: containment / critical technologies / military reach / dollar's reserve status → brief peak 1989–2007-09 → **Gilpin**: fragile pillars = dollar + MNCs + nuclear weapons → markers of decline: 9/11 → 2008 crisis (neoliberalism's limits) → Afghanistan 2021 → Russia–Ukraine → erosion deepest at the consent pillar → de-dollarisation (China, Russia, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia) → AIIB / NDB rival Bretton Woods → China across UN agencies

COUNTER-VIEW

capability is another matter → **Strange**: structural power (military, international credit, services, dollar, education) → **Zakaria**: still unrivalled in many spheres → adaptation, not collapse, decides the future

CONCLUSION ROUTES

R1 no handover: West → Asia, unipolarity → multipolarity, no successor hegemon → **Allison's** "Thucydides Trap" → order open to rivalry and economic shocks → **Keohane**: an order can outlive its hegemon

R2 **Behuria**: "Multipolarity is what the states make of it" → widened strategic autonomy for India → but room for strong powers to bend norms

American hegemony after 1945 rested on two supports: material dominance and the consent of others. Antonio Gramsci separated leadership by consent from leadership by force.

By that distinction, American decline is real but partial. Consent has weakened faster than capability. Primacy was built on containment, critical technologies, military reach & dollar's reserve status, peaking briefly, from 1989 to the crash of 2007-09. Robert Gilpin called such power fragile, since it rested on the dollar, MNCs & nuclear weapons.

Erosion runs deepest where consent was produced. De-dollarisation by China, Russia, India, Iran & Saudi Arabia attacks the currency; the AIIB & the NDB rival Bretton Woods; China's widening role across UN agencies contests the Institutions. Capability is another matter.

Susan Strange located American dominance in structural power: the military, international credit, services, the dollar and education. For Fareed Zakaria, it stays unrivalled in many spheres; adaptation will decide its future.

Graham Allison's "Thucydides Trap" places the danger of war exactly here, leaving the system open to rivalry and economic shocks. Robert Keohane argues that an order can outlive its hegemon.

As Ashok Kumar Behuria puts it, "Multipolarity is what the states make of it", widening India's strategic autonomy while letting strong powers bend norms.