Proceeding of ICGPSH 2025 Symposium: The Globalization of Connection: Language, Supply Chain, Tariff, and Trade Wars
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.LD25158

An Analysis of the Reasons Why Post-World War II Economic and Geopolitical Conditions Contributed to the Emergence of the United States as a Global Economic Superpower

Zijun Zhou

Ykpao School, Shanghai, China
Justinzzjun@gmail.com

Abstract. In the post-World War II years, the global power shift had dramatically developed, with the United States establishing itself as a central force in the order of international economic relations. The study examines how the Bretton Woods System, the Marshall Plan, the U.S. growing industries and technological breakthroughs forged the United States into the world's economic superpower. Set against the backdrop of geopolitical concerns around post-war devastation and post-war reconstruction, using a historical–economic analytical approach, this study relies on primary documents and economic data from the period 1945 to the early 1970s to reconstruct the interrelationship of policy, production, and international position. The establishment of the Bretton Woods System institutionalized the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency and placed the United States at the center of global financial institutions. The Marshall Plan not only catalyzed European recovery but also opened up new markets for American exports, fuelling domestic industrial growth. Concurrently, wartime investment in research and development spurred long-term technological innovation and bolstered U.S. competitiveness in global trade. ogether, these three factors demonstrate how U.S. strategic initiatives during this time set the groundwork for its enduring economic leadership.

Keywords: United States, Economic Superpower, Post-World War II, Bretton Woods System, Economic Impact

1. Introduction

The post-World War II era witnessed profound economic and geopolitical transformations as the United States emerged as a preeminent global superpower. Existing scholarship has extensively examined this period, focusing on the reconfiguration of international financial systems, the reconstruction of war-devastated economies, and the rapid industrialization of key nations. Scholars stressed the role of the United States in promoting changes, focusing on the country's strategic statecraft and geopolitical manoeuvring. The typical question of the initiatives that America normally took, discussed in studies are among them the Bretton Woods System that established a new monetary order, and the Marshall Plan that aided European recovery, along with America's

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.LD25158

technology and industrial progress. The overall shifts in global power dynamics following the war can be well understood based on this body of work.

Although there are numerous studies about the individual contributions of the Bretton Woods System, the Marshall Plan, and the technological progress in the formation of the US as a global economic superpower, fewer have synthesized these elements to examine their collective impact. This study aims to synthesize these dimensions to analyze. The question is about what specific economic and geopolitical reasons allowed the United States to move to global economic command after World War II. Employing a combined economic, geopolitical, and historical analysis of the Bretton Woods System, the Marshall Plan, and the expansion of U.S. industries and technology, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the historical origins of U.S. economic power. The findings contribute to academic discussions about global power structures about the historical origin of U.S. economic power. They also offer lessons for contemporary debates over global leadership by contributing such valuable insights to policymakers, economists, and historians, not only into how economic and geopolitical integration can be combined for the enhancement of influence abroad but also on the use of multilateral trade negotiations.

2. The European Recovery Program (ERP)

The European Recovery Program (ERP), or Marshall Plan, made a significant contribution to the ascendancy of the United States to its position as a global economic superpower after the end of World War II. It served to stimulate U.S. economic hegemony by linking European recovery to U.S. commercial interests. In post-war Europe, there were very few dollars so they were unable to purchase vital goods from the USA [1]. The Marshall Plan, which provided $13 billion in aid mostly in the form of food, loans, and charity, guaranteed that European recovery became reliant on US exports. This symbiotic relationship revitalized U.S. industries and helped avert a post-war recession, as European markets eagerly absorbed American goods. Exports from the United States to Europe accounted for approximately 8.3 percent of U.S. GDP in 1948, underscoring the significance of transatlantic trade in consolidating American economic dominance in the postwar period. This surge in exports was not merely a byproduct of European recovery, but a direct consequence of the Marshall Plan, which funneled over $13 billion (roughly 1.2% of U.S. GDP annually from 1948–1952) into Western Europe [2]. These funds, predominantly spent on American goods, solidified the role of the U.S. dollar as the central reserve currency under the Bretton Woods System and entrenched American economic practices in the very process of European reconstruction.

Moreover, the Plan rendered durable economic dependencies: European dependence on U.S. capital inflows, technologies and managerial models established the foundations of an American-led capitalist world order. In establishing trade patterns, production models and financial structures, the United States not only positioned itself as Europe’s benefactor; it also became the principal architect and enforcer of the liberal international economic system: one defined by open markets and dollar hegemony.

The Marshall Plan also served as a strategic geopolitical tool in the U.S. effort to check Soviet expansion. France and Italy with their economic despair saw communist parties gaining influence by 1947 which saw the influence of the Soviet Union grow in these countries [3]. The U.S. portrayed the Plan as a defense of democracy and Secretary of State George Marshall framing it a choice between “chaos, poverty, and despair” and “order, prosperity, and freedom.” By stabilizing the economies of Western Europe, the Plan deprived the appeal of communism and thereby helped nations to remain aligned with the U.S. The Marshall Plan, with $1.4 billion in aid from 1948 to 1952, helped West Germany an economy to recover, currency and infrastructure. This economic

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.LD25158

revival set the stage not only for the so-called Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracle) but also helped entrench West Germany in the Western capitalist camp, restricting Soviet influence and stopping the spread of communism from reaching the heart of Europe. By 1952, Europe was on a trajectory of sustained growth.

The aid provided under the Plan was conditional on recipient countries implementing market-oriented reforms, lowering trade barriers and cooperating with American-led institutions such as the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC). This prevented Western European nations such as France, Italy and West Germany from slipping out of American control. By coupling reconstruction assistance with political and economic liberalization, the U.S. hitched itself to policies that ultimately promoted anti-communism, repelled leftist mobilization, and limited Soviet influence, particularly in politically volatile countries like Italy and Greece. In so doing, the U.S. redefined foreign aid as a strategic tool of soft power diplomacy, interweaving American capitalist values into the governance reformation and rebuilding process in Europe.

Finally, the Marshall Plan facilitated European economic integration and laid the foundation for modern European standards. As part of the Plan it urged participating nations to work together for economic recovery and resulted in the setting up of, among other things, the European Payments Union and, ultimately, the birth of the European Coal and Steel Community [4]. They engaged in trade and cooperation with European nations, thus reducing the existing rivalries between nations and promoting a shared purpose. The Plan was able to accelerate Europe's recovery while creating a stable bloc of nations reliant on U.S. interests by forcing an economic interdependence. This long-term integration made sure that Europe continued to be an important partner of the U.S. thereby extending the global political and economic influence of the latter. Therefore, the legacy of the Marshall Plan lasts beyond the recovery of post-war, through the foundations of the modern global economy and the U.S.'s role in it.

3. Bretton Woods system

U.S. economic hegemony was instituted through the Bretton Woods framework, which effectively tied the global monetary system to the U.S. dollar. In the immediate postwar period, the United States stood as the stabilizing force in the world economy, being the only country capable of converting its currency into gold—the world's primary monetary reserve. By 1945, the United States possessed about $20 billion in gold reserves—over 70 percent of all official holdings—whereas it produced almost half of the total global industrial output [5]. This unprecedented concentration of financial and productive capacity enabled the ability of the United States to dictate a framework of the Bretton Woods system of which the Articles of Agreement of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was a particularly important part. Article IV of the 1944 agreement created a gold-exchange standard whereby currencies were pegged to the U.S. dollar, which would then be convertible into gold at a fixed rate of $35 per ounce [5]. This essentially gave the U.S. dollar the status of global reserve currency, formalizing America's gold-for-now monetary monarchy. By anchoring the global monetary system to its own currency—backed by the world's biggest pile of gold—the U.S. embedded its economic clout into the governing institutions of international finance, and guaranteed structural dominance over exchange rates, capital flows and monetary stability.

The hegemony of the dollar was further reinforced by Bretton Woods institutions, especially the IMF, which is a mandate for its members to peg their currencies to the dollar and hence sustained global demand for U.S. currency and financial securities. This arrangement allowed the U.S. to externalize economic adjustments, as deficit nations were forced to implement austerity measures or devalue their currencies, while the U.S. faced no equivalent pressure to correct its imbalances. Over

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.LD25158

time, the system enabled the Federal Reserve to function as the world's central bank, setting monetary policy that reverberated across economies dependent on dollar liquidity. Critics argue that this structure entrenched dependency, as seen in developing nations that struggled to stabilize their economies under IMF-imposed austerity programs [6]. Nevertheless, the dollar's centrality in global trade and finance became a cornerstone of U.S. economic power, facilitating its ability to finance deficits, expand corporate influence abroad, and project geopolitical power through financial leverage.

A second critical impact of Bretton Woods was its role in advancing U.S. geopolitical objectives during the Cold War. Originally intended to rebuild the postwar world, the World Bank became an implementer of capitalist democracies, more in adherence to U.S. interests, in Western Europe and East Asia. The U.S. revived their war-torn economies and fought against Soviet influence by channelling the loans through institutions and bilateral initiatives like the World Bank and the Marshall Plan respectively [7]. The same was true of the IMF's stabilization programs in Japan and South Korea, in which economic policies were used to persuade these nations to align their policies with U.S. strategic goals, and thereby turn them into capitalist bulwarks against the influence of the Soviet Union or China. However, the system was criticized for putting the Cold War imperative ahead of equitable development. Academics say the World Bank's early focus on major infrastructure projects—dams, highways, power plants—often dovetailed with U.S. corporate interests because contracts tended to go to American engineering and construction companies [7]. In practical terms, a preoccupation with trade trends was more prominent than addressing social inequality and poverty reduction faced by recipient states, further entrenching cycles of economic dependency and constraining agencies of developmental autonomy for aid-holding nations. Nonetheless, by intertwining economic recovery with anti-communism, Bretton Woods cemented the U.S. as the leader of the "free world," using financial aid and trade access to consolidate a network of alliances that endured beyond the Cold War.

Finally, the Bretton Woods framework catalyzed the globalization of trade under rules that disproportionately favored U.S. industries. Although GATT was not formally incorporated into the Bretton Woods framework, as an extension of the agenda of the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference, its design concepts, along with the IMF and the World Bank, constitute the 'three pillars' of the postwar economic order. The U.S. leveraged its influence to shape GATT negotiations, securing tariff reductions on industrial goods while protecting its agricultural and manufacturing sectors [8]. This asymmetrical liberalization allowed American corporations to trade surplus products in the global market to newly rebuild economies in Europe and Asia. The advantage of this system was further entrenched when the dollar came to play its role as the primary medium for international transactions, thereby simplifying trade financing for U.S. firms and reducing exchange rate risks.

However, the rigidity of the system was apparent over time. The fixed exchange rate regime collapsed in 1971 when the US gave up on gold convertibility, revealing the weaknesses of a regime that was too dependent on the stability of the US economy. Despite these limitations, the framework of open markets and interdependency amongst nations that was established, laid the groundwork for modern, globalized financial and technological leadership that the US achieved in the late 20th century.

4. Conclusion

The Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods system are not to be isolated as unique acts, but rather as complementary policies that set the United States on a path of global superpower hood. The Bretton Woods framework contributed to the development of the institutional framework that justified the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.LD25158

U.S. dominance of the world economy, and further when the Marshall Plan was acted upon in the form of stabilization in Europe and preventing Soviet expansion. Together, these initiatives ensured that the U.S. built the post-war world on American terms, planting an American footprint in the global economy and geopolitics. Their combined impacts not only made the U.S. the head of the free world but also the building blocks of a modern globalized economy. These initiatives demonstrate the enduring power of the concept of economic statecraft in the interactions between countries. Nevertheless, this research also has its limitations. While it lays out the structural impact of U.S. policy during the postwar period, it does less to engage the interests of direct recipients and the socio-economic inequities such systems may have replicated.

References

[1] Eichengreen, B., & Uzan, M. (1992). The Marshall Plan: Economic effects and implications for Eastern Europe and the former USSR. Economic Policy, 7(14), 13-75.
[2] May, S. (1948). Measuring the Marshall Plan. Foreign Affairs, 26(3), 457-469.
[3] Kunz, D. B. (1997). The Marshall Plan reconsidered: A complex of motives. Foreign Affairs, 76(3), 162-170.
[4] Borchard, E. (1947). Intervention—The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. The American Journal of International Law, 41(4), 885-888.
[5] Chhibber, A. (2022). What ails the Bretton Woods system? In Modernizing the Bretton Woods Institutions for the Twenty-First Century (pp. 6-8). Atlantic Council.
[6] Bordo, M. D., & Eichengreen, B. (Eds.). (2007). A retrospective on the Bretton Woods system: lessons for international monetary reform. University of Chicago Press.
[7] Tria, G., Arcelli, A. F., & Fay, R. (2020). Toward a renewed Bretton Woods. In The World with and after COVID-19 (pp. 3-5). Centre for International Governance Innovation.
[8] Wethington, O., & Manning, R. A. (2015). Bretton Woods monetary architecture. In Shaping the Asia-Pacific Future: Strengthening the Institutional Architecture for an Open, Rules-Based Economic Order (pp. 25-29). Atlantic Council.