International Primacy

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Is the Game Worth the Candle?

Does international primacy matter? In the past, this question was not worth asking. The great powers—and the term is suggestive—always struggled for position, and the top two or three of them, with the glaring exception of the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, sought to be the leading state.¹ Disagreements about who had succeeded and who was slipping were common and usually of more than academic interest, as was true of the debates in the 1980s about whether the United States was or would remain “number one.”² Today, however, the important argument is whether the United States needs to strive to maintain its primacy. One could take more than an article to define this concept, but I think that for most purposes a simple definition will do: primacy means being much more powerful than any other state according to the usual and crude measures of power (e.g., gross national product; size of the armed forces; lack of economic, political, and geographic vulnerabilities). This in turn implies that the state has greater ability than any rival to

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1. See, for example, Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in the International System* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict From 1500–2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); Charles Doran, *Systems in Crisis: New Imperatives of High Politics at Century's End* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). I use the term primacy rather than hegemony because the latter has two connotations, neither intended here. It is often used to describe a state like Hitler's Germany or Napoleon's France that seeks to dominate the international system, leaving others only token autonomy. More recently, it has been used to describe a state sufficiently powerful to influence strongly the economic practices prevailing in much of the world. Because I am concerned more with political than with economic arrangements (although of course the two are hard to separate), I wish to avoid the second meaning; because I do not mean to bring to mind either complete domination or malign intentions, I want to avoid the connotations of the first meaning of hegemony.

2. Among the responses to Kennedy are Samuel Huntington, “The U.S.—Decline or Renewal?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 1988–89), pp. 76–96; and Joseph Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990). Kennedy's response to the first wave of criticisms can be found in “Can the U.S. Remain Number One?” *New York Review of Books*, March 16, 1989, pp. 36–42. For the debate within early twentieth-century Great Britain on whether that country was still the strongest in Europe, see Aaron Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

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influence a broad range of issues and a large number of states. Furthermore, a state with primacy can establish, or at least strongly influence, "the rules of the game" by which international politics is played, the intellectual frameworks employed by many states, and the standards by which behavior is judged to be legitimate.³ In the past, any state in this position could protect and benefit itself. But is the game still worth the candle?

As usual, Bernard Brodie put the key question well and, again as usual, Samuel Huntington cut to the heart of the matter with a clear and important statement, although one I believe to be incorrect. In explaining the continuing relevance of Clausewitz, Brodie uses as the title of the first chapter of his classic *War and Politics*⁴ the question posed by Marshal Foch: "*De quoi s'agit-il?*"—what is it all about? Foch, Clausewitz, and Brodie were referring to the use of force in international politics, but it is now appropriate to apply the question more broadly. Most Realists would accept Lenin's answer, "*kto kovo*"—who-whom, meaning which state or class will dominate and which will be dominated. In parallel, when Huntington discusses why Americans are so concerned about growing Japanese economic power, he argues: "The United States is obsessed with Japan for the same reason that it was once obsessed with the Soviet Union. It sees that country as a major threat to its primacy in a crucial arena of power."⁵ A related position is expressed in the Pentagon's draft Defense Planning Guidance for the Fiscal Years 1994–99:

Our first objective is to prevent the reemergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order posed formerly by the Soviet Union. . . . [Aside from the former USSR,] there are other potential nations or coalitions that could, in the further future, develop strategic aims and a defense posture of region-wide or global

3. The notion of "meta-power" captures some of this: see T. Baumgartner and T.R. Burns, "The Structuring of International Economic Relations," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (June 1975), pp. 126–159; and Stephen Krasner, *Structural Conflict: The Third World Against Global Liberalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). For discussions of socialization, see Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 74–77; 127–28; G. John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Summer 1990), pp. 283–316.

4. Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

5. Samuel Huntington, "America's Changing Strategic Interests," *Survival*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January/February 1991), p. 8. Also see Edward Luttwak, "From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce," *National Interest*, No. 20 (Summer 1990), pp. 17–23; Edward Olsen, "Target Japan as America's Economic Foe," *Orbis*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Fall 1992), pp. 491–504. For a reply to Olsen, see Edward Hudgins, "Japan's Prosperity Is Not a Danger," *ibid.*, pp. 505–510.

domination. Our strategy must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor.⁶

I do not think that Huntington, the Pentagon, or most of us have come to grips with Foch's question, which must provide the foundations for foreign policy. We need to ask what goals the United States seeks and whether they are likely to be menaced by the growing power of other states.⁷

Relative Versus Absolute Gains

Foreign policy debates tend to degenerate into assertion of preferences and unsupported predictions unless they are rooted in theories about how international politics works.⁸ Many of the issues involved in whether the United States should seek primacy can be understood in terms of the importance of relative as contrasted with absolute gains. Arguments that the United States must beat back challenges for economic or political dominance are couched in terms of zero-sum competition and positional advantages. The claim is that, now as in the past, the anarchic nature of international politics requires states to be deeply concerned not only with how various policies and outcomes directly affect them, but also with the question of whether they are gaining more (or losing less) than others. Indeed, this is a fundamental postulate of Realism. "When faced with the possibility of cooperating for mutual gain, states that feel insecure must ask how the gain will be divided. They are compelled to ask not 'Will both of us gain?' but 'Who will gain more?'"⁹ The reason is not envy or a mindless desire for status, but rather a preoccupation with power, which in most formulations has at least an element of comparison built into it. A state may then reasonably reject an arrangement that increases its territory and resources if others gain even more than it does. To the extent that economic advantage produces military

6. "Excerpts from Pentagon's Plan: 'Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival'," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, p. 14. Because this document was leaked to the press, public pressure led to a revision that apparently took a less controversial position; see Patrick Tyler, "Pentagon Drops Goal of Blocking New Superpowers," *New York Times*, May 24, 1992, pp. 1, 14. But it is not yet clear which document best represents the thrust of American policy.

7. For the purposes of this discussion, I will neglect the Russian nuclear threat to the United States.

8. A good discussion of this point along with useful examples can be found in Stephen Walt, "Alliance, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy," *Security Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1992), pp. 465–469.

9. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 105.

strength or can be used to produce further gains, the same logic applies in this realm as well.¹⁰

PRIMACY, RELATIVE GAINS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF WAR

The importance of relative gains is obvious when war is a real possibility. In that case, the state must be concerned about how it will fare in an armed contest with its rivals and therefore will want to maximize its advantage over them—or at least be sure that it is not disadvantaged. In the current era, we need to begin by asking whether nuclear weapons, especially the possession of second-strike capability, have rendered this approach obsolete. It is no accident that Bernard Brodie and his colleagues titled their classic book written at the beginning of the atomic age *The Absolute Weapon*.¹¹ What mattered was that the state had the absolute ability to destroy the other, not the relative size of the two states' stockpiles. Of course the validity of this position is hotly contested in a debate that forms the backbone of arguments about alternative nuclear strategies. These issues matter now only if the United States needs to worry about the possibility of a war with another developed country. This is not out of the question: forms of Realism that stress the conflict-generating nature of the structure of the international system lead to the conclusion that cooperation among the western states was, in significant

10. The question of whether, and the conditions under which, states seek absolute or relative gains has received much attention recently: see, for example, Arthur Stein, "The Hegemon's Dilemma," *International Organization*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring 1984), pp. 355–386; Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate: Circumstance and Choice in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), chapter 5; Joseph Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 485–508; Grieco, *Cooperation Among Nations: Europe, America, and Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Robert Jervis, "Realism, Game Theory, and Cooperation," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (April 1988), pp. 334–336; Duncan Snidal, "Relative Gains and International Cooperation," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (September 1991), pp. 701–726; Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (December 1991), pp. 1303–1320; Powell, "Intrinsic Ends and Instrumental Means in International Politics," *American Political Science Review*, forthcoming; Michael Mastanduno, "Do Relative Gains Matter? America's Response to Japanese Industrial Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 73–113; Jonathan Tucker, "Partners and Rivals: A Model of International Collaboration in Advanced Technology," *International Organization*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Winter 1991), pp. 83–120. The most recent contributions are Joseph Grieco, "Understanding the Problem of International Cooperation: The Limits of Neoliberal Institutionalism, and the Future of Realist Theory"; and Robert Keohane, "Institutionalist Theory and the Realist Challenge After the Cold War" in David Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming), which also reprints several of the articles cited above.

11. Bernard Brodie, et al., *The Absolute Weapon* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946).

measure, caused by the Cold War and may well disappear with the end of that era.¹² By contrast, more eclectic Realism that looks at the costs and benefits that war and its alternatives are likely to bring, as well as at changing national goals and outlooks, indicates that cooperation among the developed countries is likely to continue.¹³ Although I have taken the latter position and argued that it is hard to imagine the rise of a conflict sufficiently severe to lead any developed country to believe that a war with one of its peers is an appropriate solution to its problems, Richard Betts issues an appropriate warning:

Major discontinuities in international relations are seldom predicted. Who would not have been derided and dismissed in 1988 for predicting that within a mere three years Eastern Europe would be liberated, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union deposed, and the Union itself on the ash heap of history? Yet it is hard to believe that the probability of equally revolutionary negative developments, of economic crisis and ideological disillusionment with democracy, of scapegoating and instability leading to miscalculation, escalation, and war several years from now is lower than the probability of the current peace seemed several years ago.¹⁴

Of course American policy can influence the chance of war. Some would argue that the United States can decrease the chance that others will develop dangerous ambitions and destabilizing fears by showing that it will do everything it can to maintain its primacy. This was the rationale for the recommendation in the Pentagon's draft Defense Guidance that the United States should seek to prevent other countries—including its current allies—from seeking to challenge its position. To this end, it is argued, the United States should be prepared not only to deter challengers, but also to protect many of their interests so that they do not need to greatly increase their own military forces.¹⁵ But an American policy that stresses the possibility of great power wars and the concomitant continued importance of relative gains

12. John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56.

13. John Mueller, *Retreat From Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Jervis, "The Future of World Politics: Will It Resemble the Past?" *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Winter 1991/92), pp. 39–73.

14. Richard Betts, "Systems for Peace or Causes of War? Collective Security, Arms Control, and the New Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer 1992), p. 14.

15. "Excerpts From Pentagon's Plan: 'Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival'." The revised version of this document seems to have dropped the emphasis on deterrence but retained the discussion of protecting others' interests; Tyler, "Pentagon Drops Goal of Blocking New Superpowers."

might turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy that will make such wars more likely.¹⁶

Primacy Without Great Power War

At this point, however, the possibility of war is not the major reason for concern with relative gains. They also are sought if it is believed that they will lead to increased absolute gains in the future: positive feedback can be at work when states use competitive advantages to increase later benefits and when falling behind concomitantly would lead to greater distress later. While states, like individuals who are not influenced by envy, care only about costs and benefits to themselves, these can be influenced by the fates of others. To the extent that the future well-being of the United States is threatened by the success of others, it has to seek to prevent them from doing better (or less worse) than it does. (The other side of this coin is that conflict is generated as others will symmetrically seek relative gains of their own.) Even without fear of war, a state that was ultimately concerned only about the welfare of its citizens would have to be concerned about the growth rates of others if it believed that for others to grow faster than it (or to dominate certain industrial sectors) would lower the state's absolute level of well-being in the future. This result could come about through either the natural operation of the economic system or the other state's coercive policy. Thus some analysts argue that "the growth of Japanese economic power threatens American economic well-being,"¹⁷ but whether this is in fact the case is far from clear. Recently the American economy has grown slowly and investment and productivity have lagged: simultaneously the Japanese economy has done quite well and the result has been the distress of a number of American industries. But whether Japan's success is the *cause* of America's problems has yet to be established. The implication that the United States would do better if Japan did worse is an unsubstantiated hypothesis. Eco-

16. This is a version of the familiar argument between proponents of deterrence theory and the spiral model of conflict: see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), chapter 3. For a summary of the recent arguments in several arenas, see Paul Stern, et al., eds., *Perspectives on Deterrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). I suspect that those who think that war remains a real possibility also believe that an assertive American policy is more likely to prevent it, and that those who think that there is no longer much reason for developed states to fight each other are prone to worry that the American pursuit of primacy is not only wasteful, but might also be dangerous.

17. Huntington, "America's Changing Strategic Interests," p. 10.

conomic competition is not necessarily like military competition: gains on the part of a rival do not automatically make the state worse off.¹⁸

Strategic trade theory argues that those who start with a small advantage can reap much greater gains in the future if they can thereby move up the learning curve more rapidly than their competitors and therefore are able to keep the latter from challenging them. By protecting home markets and subsidizing exports, the state and industry can gain so great a lead over rivals that the state can later afford to remove the protectionist measures without sacrificing its dominance.¹⁹ But there is only limited evidence on this point, and the models apply only under restricted conditions and may have little prescriptive value.²⁰

Even when positive feedback is not at work, competition and a struggle for primacy are required for goods that are inherently positional. Status, prestige, and some kinds of self-images fit in this category.²¹ Only one country can win the most medals in the Olympics; Americans may simply feel less good about themselves if the Japanese economy grows faster than the American one. If one country gains prestige, other countries have to lose it if the standard of judgment is comparative. The sense of being better or doing better than other countries may also produce self-confidence that helps convince leaders, elites, and the general public to take on important and difficult international tasks. Would the United States have sent forces to Somalia if its citizens (and, even more, its president) had not felt that it was

18. Paul Krugman, "Myths and Realities of U.S. Competitiveness," *Science*, Vol. 254 (November 1991), pp. 811–815.

19. The literature on strategic trade theory is large: see, for example, Paul Krugman, *Strategic Trade Policy and the New International Economics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); Klaus Stegemann, "Policy Rivalry Among Industrial States: What Can We Learn from Models of Strategic Trade Policy?" *International Organization*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Winter 1989), pp. 73–100; Helen Milner and David Yoffie, "Between Free Trade and Protectionism: Strategic Trade Policy and the Theory of Corporate Trade Demand," *International Organization*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 239–272. A similar argument was made a generation ago in E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: The Making of Modern English Society*, Vol. 2: 1750 to the Present Day (New York: Pantheon, 1968).

20. Some limitations on the theory are explained by Paul Krugman, "Introduction: New Thinking about Trade Policy," in Krugman, ed., *Strategic Trade Policy and the New International Economics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 14–20; for a critique see Gene Grossman, "Strategic Export Promotion: A Critique," in Krugman, ed., *Strategic Trade Policy and the New International Economics*, chapter 3. For a reaffirmation of the value of the theory and its applicability, see J. David Richardson, "'New' Trade Theory and Policy a Decade Old: Assessment in a Pacific Context," in John Ravenhill, ed., *Pacific Economic Relations in the 1990s* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

21. For a superb study of positional goods, see Fred Hirsch, *The Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

the prime if not dominant state in world politics? These considerations are elusive, but they may play a role in establishing national moods which influence behavior.²²

For further discussion, we can usefully separate arguments about the importance of primacy that focus on conflict from those that stress the need for cooperation. That is, the most obvious line of argument is that the United States needs to maintain its dominant position because there are important conflicts of interest between it and other developed countries. But a different chain of reasoning sees the main problem not as others gaining at America's expense, but as the need to provide public or collective goods. In this view, it is still important for the United States to maintain primacy, but doing so is in the interests of other developed countries as well.

COMPETITIVE REASONS FOR SEEKING PRIMACY

If statesmen expect peace among the developed countries, what are the competitive reasons for seeking primacy? What does the United States want that brings it into conflict with others? The wording of the draft Defense Guidance was interesting: "Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival . . . *that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union.* This . . . requires that we endeavor to prevent any *hostile* power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power."²³ Realism that is based on structural considerations and that assumes a constant struggle for power would not need the emphasized phrases because *any* rival would be seen as posing a serious threat. But it is far from clear that this is an accurate view of the world. We can make the question concrete by asking whether it is in the American interest for Europe to unite. If this were to occur, the new entity would be at least as strong as the United States by almost all indicators of power. It is not surprising that the United States encouraged a high degree of European unity during the Cold War in order to strengthen the anti-Soviet coalition, but, contrary to what should be the case if there were strong

22. See, for example, Robert Dallek, *The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics and Foreign Affairs* (New York: Knopf, 1983). Discussion of national mood is often linked to arguments about cycles: see Frank Klingberg, "The Historical Alternation of Moods in American Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (January 1952), pp. 239–273; Klingberg, *Cyclical Trends in American Foreign Policy Moods: The Unfolding of America's World Role* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983); Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), chapters 2–3.

23. "Excerpts From Pentagon's Plan: 'Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival'."

competitive reasons for the United States to maintain primacy, this attitude has continued. Although some have voiced concern that American firms might suffer because tariffs on American goods will remain while those within Europe would disappear, few have seen dire international political consequences in the rise of what would clearly be another superpower. To the contrary, it appears that most Americans believe that a united Europe would both increase world-wide prosperity and constitute an entity that will cooperate effectively with the United States to reach common goals.

One can argue that increased European power will be dangerous because throughout the Cold War the Europeans were less willing than the United States to sacrifice commercial gain for generally shared political objectives—for example, European countries did little to restrain their firms from selling materials that would enable other countries to develop nuclear and chemical weapons and associated delivery systems. But this difference in behavior may have stemmed in part from the fact that the European states were small enough to be “free riders” and take advantage of the American willingness to bear a disproportionate share of the non-proliferation burden. A united Europe would presumably play a larger role in world politics and therefore might be more responsible on these issues. Similarly, Japanese behavior, both diplomatic and economic, may well change as its influence increases. Although not all countries use their power for the same ends, in part because of differences in values and domestic systems (if Hitler had won World War II, it is unlikely that the Nazi hegemony would have produced an open economic system), we should not exaggerate the difference between Japanese and Western trading practices or neglect the extent to which growing trade and investment abroad will change behavior.²⁴

Where disagreements stem from differences in values, interests, or beliefs rather than different placements in the structure of the international system, American preferences will suffer as others grow stronger. For example, the Europeans have traditionally been more “even-handed” (or, from a different perspective, more “pro-Arab”) in Middle Eastern issues than has the United States. Whether this is due to Europe’s greater reliance on Arab oil, its closer ties to the Arab world, lack of a strong pro-Israeli lobby, or different views of the merits of the case (or some combination of these) cannot be readily determined. Although the American position has changed some in recent

24. On the latter point, see Richard Rosecrance and Jennifer Taw, “Japan and the Theory of Leadership,” *World Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (January 1990), pp. 184–209.

years, the difference in policy has not disappeared and a stronger Europe could therefore more effectively present a policy that conflicted with the American one. Surely other policy differences will arise in the future as well. Thus September 1992 saw German-American disputes over interest rates, rescheduling of the debts of the former Soviet Union, and the possibility of a permanent seat on the Security Council for Germany.²⁵ Shortly thereafter, the United States and Europe engaged in a game of Chicken over agriculture that nearly led to a trade war. Issues like these are likely to be staples of future international politics among developed countries. But there does not seem to be any reason to expect them to concern central values or to lead either Europe or the United States to regret that the other is a major power or to seek to weaken the other. Although each state will want to have significant bargaining resources and leverage over others in order to protect and further its interests, the stakes and the intensity of the competition will be much lower than was the case when international politics was infused with deep concerns for survival and security.

Perhaps American primacy would bring with it major economic advantages. In part, this raises the question of the fungibility of power, which may have a different answer in a world of decreased security concerns than it did during the Cold War. Under many circumstances political power can contribute to economic goals. Indeed, in the event of major international conflict, a weaker country may not be able to maintain its desired economic and domestic system in the face of pressure, let alone out-right attack, by a stronger rival. No one expects Japan or Europe to present this kind of pressure to the United States, nor is anyone recommending that the United States try to develop sufficient military and political power that it could use threats to extort economic benefit from its allies. But during the Cold War, there seem to have been implicit bargains between the United States and its allies that involved trade-offs between security and economic issues, and related arrangements might still be possible.²⁶ Perhaps the United States could turn military and diplomatic resources into economic benefits by either coercing others or performing services for them for which it would receive payment. Convincing others to pay for military ventures might be possible,

25. Keith Bradsher, "Talks on Rescheduling Moscow's Debt Pits U.S. and Russia Against Germany," *New York Times*, September 21, 1992; Paul Lewis, "Germany Tells U.N. It Wants a Permanent Seat on the Council," *New York Times*, September 23, 1992.

26. The classic article is Robert Gilpin, "The Politics of Transnational Economic Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Summer 1971), pp. 398–419.

but even in the Gulf War the United States did little more than break even. It seems unlikely that in a world of low security threats and great common interests among the developed countries, the route to economic strength for the United States would lie through gaining significant unilateral military and political advantage over Europe and Japan.

NON-COMPETITIVE REASONS FOR PRIMACY

Even if there are few competitive reasons to seek primacy, there may be cooperative ones. Here, the problem is not that the United States needs to be number one, as much as it is that some state has to fill this role in order to provide general or public goods.²⁷ It may be true that the other developed countries share with the United States the most important foreign policy goals—e.g., the maintenance of an open economic system, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, fostering human rights, deterring aggression, protecting the environment—but pursuing these goals involves significant costs and if power is distributed relatively equally among many countries, no one of them will have the incentives to make the effort that is necessary to reach these goals. In principle, a country that not only increased its power relative to that of the United States but surpassed it could provide the leadership that would be in the common interest. But even a fully united Europe could not do this for decades. Thus the result of other states gaining power at the expense of the United States would not be that any of them would become the leading state, but that power would become diffused.

Increased diffusion of power may not mean that the problems of organizing the international system for collective action will be much greater than they have been in the recent past, however. Just as it is important not to exaggerate the decline of American power,²⁸ so it is also important to remember that even at its height America could only bargain with other developed countries, not dictate to them. Furthermore, even if Japan and Europe grow faster than the United States in economic strength and diplomatic influence, the change from the current situation will be slow and, by most scales, slight. The collective goods problem would indeed be very great if we were moving

27. This is the argument of the cooperative or benign form of hegemonic stability theory, well represented by Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

28. Bruce Russett, "The Mysterious Case of Vanishing Hegemony; Or, Is Mark Twain Really Dead?" *International Organization*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Spring 1985), pp. 207–232; Huntington, "The U.S.: Decline or Renewal?"

from a situation in which one country was dominant to one in which power was evenly spread over ten or fifteen states. But this is not the case. There are only a few powerful and highly developed countries. We are not confronting the classic problem in which every actor is so small that it knows that its behavior will not make a noticeable difference in whether collective goods are provided or not. To the contrary, each knows that a refusal to do its share can undermine the system and, in so doing, endanger its own welfare. Cooperation of course is not guaranteed, but at least is possible.²⁹

In the economic arena it is often argued that the end of American primacy and the continued diffusion of power will lead to the division of the world into three trading blocs—a group in Asia dominated by Japan, a Europe dominated by Germany, and the Americas under U.S. hegemony.³⁰ These fears arose even before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War removed some of the inhibitions restraining states from moving toward the formation of blocs. Without dismissing these concerns, I think two points are warranted. First, no amount of American effort, hard bargaining with its trading partners, or domestic growth will return the United States to the position of economic dominance it held in the 1950s. If a world of trading blocs is to be avoided, it will have to be through negotiations and shared understandings among states of relatively equal resources. Second, the fact that the fears of widespread protectionism are by now longstanding gives us some grounds for optimism since previous predictions of economic closure have not been borne out. Most countries see this path as undesirable and are willing to pay a significant price to block it. There is a good chance they will do so; not only is the number of major states sufficiently small that the pessimistic framework of collective goods does not apply, but those who engage in protectionism may suffer retaliation rather than gaining a free ride, thereby increasing the chances of cooperation.³¹

29. The literature on cooperation in situations that approximate a Prisoner's Dilemma is vast: see, for example, Kenneth Oye, ed., *Cooperation Under Anarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Robert Jervis, "Realism, Game Theory, and Cooperation," pp. 317–349.

30. For a discussion of this possibility, see Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 397–406.

31. John Conybeare, "Public Goods, Prisoners' Dilemma, and the International Political Economy," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (March 1984), pp. 5–22; for an argument to the contrary, see Joanne Gowa, "Rational Hegemons, Excludable Goods, and Small Groups: An Epitaph For Hegemonic Stability Theory?" *World Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (April 1989), pp. 307–324. For further arguments that the diffusion of power is compatible with a high degree of international economic cooperation, see David Lake, *Power, Protection, and Free Trade: International Sources of U.S. Commercial Strategy, 1887–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Helen

Problems of reaching common goals of course also arise on political questions. If the United States does not take the lead, nuclear weapons may spread more rapidly because no one will restrain the sales of nuclear materials and because countries throughout the world will have greater fears for their security—and greater hopes for coercing others. If the United States does not lead a coalition to block aggression, the world may become much more insecure and war-prone. Proponents of these arguments point to the fact that aggression was punished and reversed in the Gulf under U.S. leadership, but not in Yugoslavia when the United States, rather than firmly taking the lead, largely left it to the Europeans. Indeed, the strongest international measures to contain Serbia—first the economic embargo and then the prohibition of flights over Bosnia—were taken only on the American initiative. Furthermore, no country other than the United States was willing and able to move into the chaos of Somalia. As President Bush said when explaining why he was sending in 28,000 troops to enable food to be distributed, “I understand the United States alone cannot right the world’s wrongs, but. . . only the United States has the global reach to place a large security force on the ground in such a distant place quickly and efficiently and thus save thousands of innocents from death.”³²

A related argument is that the United States needs to maintain world order to discourage others from believing that the only way they can protect their own interests is by increasing their power. Thus the draft Defense Guidance argues:

The U.S. must show the leadership necessary to establish and protect a new order that holds the promise of convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests. . . . [The U.S.] will retain the pre-eminent responsibility for addressing selectively those wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends.³³

Milner, *Resisting Protectionism: Global Industries and the Politics of International Trade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Richard Rosecrance, “The Prospect of World Economic Conflict: Implications for the Global System and for Europe,” in Beverly Crawford, ed., *The Future of European Security* (Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley International and Area Studies Research Series, No. 84, 1992), pp. 122–151. The argument can be traced to the discussion of k-groups in Thomas Schelling, *Micromotives and Microbehavior* (New York: Norton, 1978), chapter 7.

32. “Transcript of President’s Address on Somalia,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1992, p. 4.

33. “Excerpts From Pentagon’s Plan: ‘Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival’.”

There is a good deal to this argument that American primacy is needed to maintain international cooperation for common goals, but it is not entirely convincing. First, the difference between the Gulf and Yugoslavia is not entirely to be explained by differences in American behavior. Or, to put it slightly differently, differences in American behavior were in part the product of differences in expectations about how others would behave.³⁴ Second, the exercise of strong leadership may be self-limiting if others resent the American role. Maintaining the Gulf War coalition was a marvelous feat of diplomacy and many other countries presumably feel they benefited by letting the United States set the policy. But they may have been disturbed and resentful as well because they did not have much influence; they might be less willing to be junior partners in future endeavors. Third, even if the United States remains the leading world power, it may not have sufficient resources to provide public goods. The United States will never regain the position it held in the 1950s and 1960s. In the political as in the economic arena, even if the diffusion of power is arrested, it is not likely to be reversed.

But cooperative action is still possible: the number of leading states is small, the conflicts among them are not enormous, and the contribution made by each is large enough to have a significant impact on the outcome. Concerts have provided a significant measure of security in the past, and the conditions for establishing related arrangements are propitious: the developed countries have relatively little to gain by exploiting each other, and much to lose if mutual cooperation breaks down.³⁵ A decrease in the American ability to reach many common goals through its own efforts would not necessarily mean that such goals would not be reached. Contrary to President Bush's claim, the size of the force required for Somalia in December 1992 was not beyond the reach of the NATO allies, either singly or acting together, especially if the United States provided logistical support. Indeed, the United

34. For a discussion of followership, see Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgott, and Kim Nossal, "Bound to Follow? Leadership and Followership in the Gulf Conflict," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 106, No. 3 (Fall 1991), pp. 391-410.

35. For discussions of the Concert, how it functioned historically, the conditions that produced it, and how a concert might function in the future, see Richard Elrod, "The Concert of Europe: A Fresh Look at an International System," *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (January 1976), pp. 159-174; Paul Schroeder, "The 19th-Century International System: Changes in Structure," *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (October 1986), pp. 1-26; Robert Jervis, "Security Regimes," *International Organization*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 362-368; Jervis, "From Balance to Concert: A Study of International Security Cooperation," *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (October 1985), pp. 58-79; Charles Kupchan and Clifford Kupchan, "Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 114-161.

States may benefit if it cannot do the job on its own. As long as cases in which it would want to intervene on a large scale also deeply involve the interests of other developed states as well,³⁶ the costs, responsibilities, and decisions also can be shared. If it is only the United States that believes intervention is necessary and if the other developed countries disagree, a distribution of power that precludes American action might not, on average, serve it badly: the American judgment in cases like this may be no better than the judgment of others. Furthermore, if intervention were possible only if it were truly joint, then other developed countries could not avoid the question of what sort of "world order" is worth seeking; they could not rely on pious pronouncements and the expectations of a division of labor whereby the United States takes the bulk of the responsibility, risk, and cost while they share in the benefit.

We should also not forget the admonition of balance of power theory that even the most benign state cannot be trusted with excessive power. Both Edmund Burke and François Fénelon, a French thinker of the late seventeenth century, argue that even with good values and moderate domestic politics, a state will behave with moderation and decency only if it is checked by others.³⁷ Kenneth Waltz draws the important conclusion about what will follow from the destruction of Soviet power: "Despite good intentions, the United States will often act in accordance with Fénelon's theorem."³⁸ Binding itself to act multilaterally by forgoing the capability to use large-scale force on its own would then provide a safeguard against the excessive use of American power. This might benefit all concerned: the United States would not be able to act on its own worst impulses; others would share the costs of interventions and would also be less fearful of the United States and so, perhaps, more prone to cooperate with it.

In summary, the pursuit of primacy was what great power politics was all about in the past. But with the development of nuclear weapons, the spread of liberal democracy to all the developed countries, and the diminution of nationalism, war among the most powerful actors is unlikely. The first reason

36. Cases like Grenada and Panama did not involve the interests of allies, but the military forces and diplomatic posture needed to intervene there were not large.

37. Edmund Burke, "Remarks on the Policy of the Allies With Respect to France," *Works*, Vol. 4 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1899), p. 457; Herbert Butterfield, "The Balance of Power," in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 140.

38. Kenneth Waltz, "America as a Model for the World? A Foreign Policy Perspective," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (December 1991), p. 699.

for striving for international primacy has then disappeared. Other reasons, both competitive and cooperative, seem weak, although the latter are stronger than the former. The United States might be able to recreate some of the unfortunate but necessary patterns from the past by behaving as though nothing has changed. But it is not forced down this path by the international environment.