CHAPTER TWO

THE BIGGER THEY COME, THE HARDER THEY FALL:

THE GRAVITATIONAL THEORY OF GREAT POWER POLITICS

In this chapter, I lay out the explanatory framework that underpins this book’s basic argument: the U.S. needs a grand strategic rethink because America’s unipolar moment, and the era of the *Pax Americana*, are fast drawing to a close. This only comes as a surprise to the American foreign policy establishment, and some U.S. security studies scholars. Distilled to its essence, my argument is that primacy (hegemony) never lasts, and invariably leads to geopolitical instability. To be precise, to hegemonic instability. By instability, I mean rivalry, security competition, and war between great powers. Even an era of “unipolar politics,” far from disappearing, great power politics lurks just below the surface.¹ Great power politics is always close at hand, and ready to make a comeback.

My argument is about the nature of great power politics - specifically, about the causes and consequences of great power rise and decline. Broadly, my explanatory framework can be thought of as The Gravitational Theory of Geopolitics. As Sir Isaac Newton famously said, whatever goes up must come down. This law applies not only in physics but also to the geopolitical trajectories of the great powers - even those that have attained primacy. In international politics, in terms of relative power, at any moment in time some great powers are going up and others are coming down - today, China and the United States respectively. The rise and decline of great powers is one of history’s constants. Even the strongest great powers - actual or near hegemons - cannot stay on top forever. The title of Paul Kennedy’s celebrated 1987 book says it all. Great powers rise. They enjoy their moment in the geopolitical sun. And

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then they fall.\textsuperscript{2} American Exceptionalism notwithstanding, the United States is no exception to this rule.

The American foreign policy establishment, however, sees things differently. Those who make U.S. grand strategy - and many (perhaps most) of those who study it - share a common set of beliefs about the nature of international politics, and America’s role in the world. For one thing, they embrace a grant strategy of primacy because they believe that “American leadership” - the code phrase for U.S. dominance - is the indispensable foundation of a peaceful and prosperous world. Unsurprisingly the U.S. foreign policy establishment has embraced the concept of unipolarity (a one great power) world - as long, of course, as the United States is the “uni” - because that means there are no rival great powers that can contest either America’s power, or its vision of international order. And, when it comes to decline, the American foreign policy establishment doesn’t want to hear about it. They believe that the U.S. has a Get Out of Jail Free Card that exempts it from the downside of the cycle of great power rise and decline that has been the hallmark of modern international history.

Going forward, the debate about U.S. grand strategy will pit the advocates of restraint and retrenchment against the proponents of American primacy. On the surface, this is a dispute about what \textit{policy} the United States should follow. Inescapably, it is also a debate about \textit{theory}. As MIT professor Stephen Van Evera observes “All evaluation of public policy requires the framing, and evaluation of theory, hence it is fundamentally theoretical.”\textsuperscript{3} Thinking clearly


about America’s grand strategic choices means grappling with questions that occupy a central place in contemporary conversations among scholars of IR theory and security studies. Are hegemonic systems - like the Pax Americana - stable? Are they durable? The same questions apply specifically to the American-dominated unipolar international system that came into being when the Soviet Union collapsed. What are the implications of major shifts in the balance of power? What happens when a rising power challenges a heretofore dominant great power? Can the interests of great powers that favor the status quo be reconciled with the interests of rising powers that want to revise it? Can any international order - composed of rules, norms, and institutions - endure when the balance of power that underpinned its creation shifts against the dominant power that established that order?

I recognize that for non-specialist readers, the word “theory” triggers what the late New York Times columnist William Safire dubbed the MEGO effect (My Eyes Glaze Over), and/or conjures visions of irrelevant, academic navel-gazing. However, instead of dozing off, or

4 With good reason. IR scholars from camps of quantitative methodology, game theory, and rational choice theory must bear much of the blame for the disparagement of theory. Most political scientists have turned their backs on the tradition of asking big, important, policy relevant questions about international politics, and America’s world role. That tradition was exemplified by, for example, by E. H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, Robert Osgood, and Robert W. Tucker. Those scholars studied the causes of war and peace, the rise and fall of great powers, and (except for Carr) the purposes of American power. In contrast, today the political science profession has fallen victim to what Notre Dame scholar Michael Desch rightly calls the “cult of irrelevance.” Instead of asking big, meaningful questions, all too many contemporary IR scholars have become practitioners of what best can be described as junk political science. Instead of grappling with big issues, they engage in small think, and focus on micro-issues of little relevance, or importance. Instead of recognizing the importance of history and ideas in international politics and the making of grand strategy, they churn out algebraic formulas and mind-numbing regression analyses that no real world policymakers, much less informed and interested citizens, would ever have the patience to read. Too much of IR theory is now devoted to the study on topics of less and less importance, the findings of which are communicated in ways the can be understood by fewer and fewer people. In this sense, the cult
closing the book, I hope my non-academic readers will bear with me while I attempt to demystify the term theory. After all, theories really are nothing more than explanatory frameworks that help us understand what causes things to happen in the real world. They are analytical tools that allow us to determine the key factors - the moving parts, or drivers (“independent variables” in polici-speak) - that produce outcomes (“dependent variables”). Good explanatory frameworks also allow us to see the causal linkages, and interactions, between and among variables. And, by identifying recurring patterns of behavior - and explaining why these patterns recur - explanatory frameworks enhance our understanding of what has happened in the past. By doing so, explanatory frameworks also can help us predict what is likely to happen in the future. Of course, international politics and grand strategy are different from the physical sciences, because it is impossible to run controlled laboratory experiments to test our cause/effect hypothesis. However, there is a rich vein of diplomatic history that we can use to test the utility, explanatory power, and predictive power of competing theories.

*The Realist Foundations of Great Power Politics*

Stephen Walt, a leading IR/security studies scholar who teaches at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, has observed although we live in one world, there are a number of theories that claim to explain international politics. With respect to understanding the nature of international politics, and U.S. grand strategy, two theoretical traditions exercise the most of irrelevance is a self-inflicted wound. Done right, however - as it is with increasingly less frequency - theory contributes to an understanding the changes taking place today in the international system, and to thinking about how U.S. grand strategy should respond to this ongoing transformation.

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influence: realism and liberal internationalism (sometimes called Wilsonianism, after President Woodrow Wilson).\textsuperscript{6} I will circle back to liberal internationalism later in the book. My starting point, however, is that the world in which great power politics takes place is fundamentally a realist world.\textsuperscript{7} Realism explains the important continuities in international politics. If, as the historian H. A. L. Fisher (or Winston Churchill, Henry Ford, or Arnold Toynbee, to each of whom this - possibly apocryphal - quote also has been attributed) said, “history is just one damn thing after another,” then for realists, international politics is the same damn things over and over again: the rise and fall of great powers, great power rivalries, security competitions, war, and power transitions. Realism explains why these phenomena are a recurring feature of international politics.

My explanatory framework rests on a foundation of six bedrock realist principles that explain why great power politics is intensely competitive. And let’s be clear: great power politics is hardball, not softball - or, as Peter Finely Dunne’s Mr. Dooley would have said, “it ain’t beanbag.” Put another way, great power politics often resembles the HBO series \textit{Game of Thrones} in the no-holds barred fervor with which the key players jockey for advantage. The upshot of my six bedrock principles tracks with Robert Gilpin’s pithy distillation of realism’s

\textsuperscript{6} Although of marginal importance with respect to policy, within the academic community there is, as the late sportscaster Howard Cosell would have put it, a veritable plethora of other IR theories that have their proponents, including: marxist (or globalist) theory, post-modernism, feminist theory, green theory and so on. Leading texts on contemporary IR theory that discuss these as well as realism and liberal internationalism, include: Viotti; Dunn; TBA

\textsuperscript{7} Rather than a single theory, realism has several variants, the most important of which are offensive realism, defensive realism, and neo-classical realism. Each of these, however, has in common several key assumptions.
essence. Realism, he says, assumes that “the fundamental nature of international politics has not changed over the millennia. International politics continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy.”

My first principle is that the international political system is state-centric, and great powers are the most important are the most important states. International politics is state-centric because politics is about relations between organized social groups, and states are the primary organized social groups in the modern world. Of course, according to international law, all sovereign states are juridically equal. But in the real world, to paraphrase George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, some states are more equal than others. And great powers are at the top of the international system’s food chain. Because they have greater capabilities - crudely, more power - than the lesser states, great powers have more ability to shape, and affect, the international political system.

To be clear, in stating that the international political system is state-centric, I do not deny the role of non-state actors: including terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (which, for example, promote human rights, democracy, and economic development). There is nothing new about the role these types of entities play in international politics, however. Since the modern international system emerged around 1500, states have never been the only actors. Nevertheless, because of


their disproportionately large ability to establish political frameworks, and “rules of the game,” the great powers determine the kind of playing field upon which non-state actors operate.

Second, the international political system is anarchic. This does not mean that chaos and disorder are rampant. Rather, anarchy highlights an important distinction between politics among states and politics within them. In an ideal type state, the government (“the state”) possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of force (except, of course, in Texas), and it - not individual citizens - is responsible for maintaining order and protecting private property. Similarly, the state wields the power to make and - importantly - enforce rules. In international politics, however, there is no central authority (“world government”) that can maintain order, protect states from aggression, and make and enforce rules of conduct. So states must take care of themselves, and put their own interests first. In other words, because there is no entity that stands above the states in the international system, international politics is a self-help system. If a state is threatened by another, there is no 911 that it can call. The basic rule of great power politics is: “you’re on your own.” Moreover, as the University of Chicago IR scholar John Mearsheimer puts it, “In a self-help world, it pays to act selfishly.”

Third, in international politics, the most basic goal of each state is to survive - to maintain its sovereignty and autonomy. In international politics, great powers are afflicted with

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10 Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, Chapter 2, pp. 4-5 (typescript); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Chapter 6

11 John Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. TBA

12 Organski has highlighted the importance of preserving the state’s autonomy and freedom of action: “Every nation...seeks to be master in its own house and to be free of external control. To this extent, it can be said that all nations seek to maintain at least a minimum of power, if only to survive as political entities, for if a nation does not have control over its own
ongoing existential angst, and always fear for their security. As Kenneth Waltz noted, states may have many objectives - some selfish, some altruistic - but if they don’t stay in the game, they will not be able to achieve any of them. And even great powers cannot take survival for granted. “State death” does not just happen to smaller states like the former Yugoslavia. It also happens to great powers. Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and, of course the Soviet Union, are great powers that permanently were knocked off the geopolitical chessboard in within the last one hundred years. Look for them on a contemporary map, and you will not find them.

Fourth, because of anarchy, and the self-help imperative, great power politics takes place under the shadow of war. Great powers individually determine their national interests, and they also decide how to attain them. They often decide to take up arms to do so. In this sense, as domestic affairs, then nationhood is an illusion, A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).


15 Because there is no over-arching law enforcement agency to prevent others from using military force against it, each state itself must be prepared to use military force to defend itself and ensure its survival. As Hans Morgenthau - one of the founders of the discipline of international relations in the U.S. academy - observed: “All history shows that nations active in international politics are continuously preparing for, actively involved in, or recovering from, organized violence in the form of war.” Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 52. Where anarchy and self-help are the hallmark of politics, Waltz noted, “the possibility that force will be used by one or another of the parties looms always as a threat in the background. In politics force is said to be the *ultima ratio*. In international politics forces serves, not only as the *ultima ratio*, but as the first and constant one.” Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 113.
Waltz observed, wars happen because there is nothing to prevent them. In great power politics, military power is of overriding importance. It serves both as a shield to deter others from attacking, and as a sword that can defeat rival great powers should deterrence fail. Great powers also use military power to backstop diplomacy.

Fifth, uncertainty is a pervasive factor in international politics: states never can be sure either of others’ intentions, or of the future distribution of power (“balance of power”) between them and their current - or potential future - rivals. There are two strategies great powers can employ to deal with this problem. First, following the logic of monopolistic firms in the marketplace, they can respond to uncertainty about the future distribution of power and seek security by eliminating the competition. In this sense, uncertainty about the future balance of power introduces a preemptive - do it to them before they do it to you - logic to great power politics. Second, great powers can insure against uncertainty by maintaining a cushion of superiority over their rivals as a hedge against sudden shifts in the balance of power. How much power is enough to serve as a safety net? The logical answer is that because the future is inherently unknowable, and potentially dangerous, great powers can never have too much power. Simply put, for great powers there is not such thing as “enough” power. The U.S. is a

16 TBA

This logic, however, causes a conundrum. If power matters in international politics - and it does, big time - it is easy to understand why great powers should try to grab as much power as they can. But, power maximizing grand strategies can cause a backlash, because they cause other states to fear for their security. The will respond by enhancing their own capabilities and thereby trigger an escalating action/reaction cycle that results in arms races and intense security competitions. IR scholars refer to this as the “security dilemma:” even self-defensive great power can instill fear in others, and as they respond with their own military buildups the end result for the initiating great power is that it is less rather than more secure. As Gilpin puts it, “by seeking to enhance its own power and security,” a great power, “necessarily increases the
good example. Even in a post-Soviet world where the United States confronted no rival great powers ("peer competitors in Pentagon-speak), it still sought "full spectrum" military dominance.

Sixth, in the competitive hothouse of great power politics, hard - military and economic - power matters. And for great powers, what matters the most is how their power stacks-up to that of actual or potential competitors: when it comes to power relationships among great powers, it’s all relative. Geopolitics, in other words, has its own theory of relativity: Shifts in relative power are caused by the differential (uneven) economic growth rates among the great powers. Simply stated, great powers do not experience identical rates of growth. This profoundly affects great power politics, because, as Robert Gilpin noted, over time “the differential growth in the

insecurity of others and stimulates competition for security and power.” Gilpin, War and Change, p. 94. The classic works on the security dilemma are, John Herz, “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,” World Politics, 2:2 (January 1950), pp. 157-180; Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma, World Politics, 30:2 (January 1978), pp. 167-214. As I have suggested elsewhere, what great powers actually confront is an insecurity condition, not a security dilemma. See, Christopher Layne, The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy From 1940 to the Present (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. TBA For great powers in an anarchic, self-help system, as long as actual or potential rivals are out there, pervasive insecurity is a fact of life. There are no grand strategies that come with a surefire guarantee that they will bring a state security, and each of the strategies in the great power playbook has drawbacks, and may lead to unintended - and unwanted - consequences

When grand strategists assess the distribution of power in the international system, it is their state’s relative power — its power compared to actual or potential rivals — that matters. Robert Gilpin, War and Change in International Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 88, 94; Mearsheimer, Great Power Politics, Chapter 2, pp. 9-10, 12-13; Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, pp. 174-175; Waltz, Theory of International Politics, p. 105-106. As the political scientist Hans Morgenthau observes: “When we refer to the power of a nation by saying that this nation is very powerful and that nation is weak, we always imply a comparison. In other words, the concept of power is a relative one....It is one of the most elemental and frequent errors in international politics to neglect this relative character of power and to deal instead with the power of a nation as though it were an absolute.”

Gilpin, War and Change; Kennedy, Rise and Fall.
power of various states in the system causes a fundamental redistribution of power in the system.”

At any point in time, some great powers will be growing at a more rapid clip than others. Rapid economic growth - which enhances a state’s relative power - affords great powers the opportunity to convert wealth into military capabilities. Consequently, states need to pay close attention to adverse shifts in their relative power position - that is, the rapid economic growth of actual or potential rivals - because they can be victimized by others whose relative power exceeds their own. If others increase their relative power, a state’s best response is to strengthen its own - relative capabilities and/or diminish that of its rivals. By doing so, a great power gets a double payoff: more security, and more strategic options. Conversely, great powers that are insufficiently attentive to their relative power position will be less secure, and find that their strategic options will be progressively constrained. The bottom line, as Robert Gilpin wrote, is that the international system's competitiveness “stimulates, and may compel, a state to increase its power; at the least, it necessitates that the prudent state prevent relative increase in the powers


21 TBA - textual note on “power conversion”

22 Gilpin, War and Change, pp. 86-87. Successful grand strategies create, rather than limit, options for policymakers. Comparing great powers to their marketplace counterparts, oligopolistic firms, UC Santa Barbara international political economist Jerry Cohen observed: “[T]he state with only one strategic option can never feel truly secure: if that strategy fails, the state will disappear, be absorbed by others, or, more like, be compelled to abandon certain of its national core values. For both the firm and the state, the rational solution is to broaden its range of option - to maximize its power position, since power sets the limits to the choice of strategy.” Benjamin J. Cohen, The Question of Imperialism: The Political Economy of Dominance and Dependence (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 240-41.
of competitor states.”

Changes in the distribution of relative power are both a cause and consequence of the rise and fall of great powers. This is why the great power league standings fluctuate over time. Periodically, as in soccer, states are relegated out of great power ranks (the premier league of international politics) into a lower division. Important causes - singly or combined - of great power relegation are economic stagnation, domestic political and social decay, and, of course, defeat in war. Today’s Europe is populated by washed-up great power has beens (notably, Germany, Britain, France). And every now and then, as already mentioned above, great powers disappear altogether. And just as great powers can die, new ones sometimes are born. Propelled by favorable relative power shifts, every so often new great powers burst onto the scene - as did the U.S., Germany, and Japan in the late 19th Century - and when they do, geopolitical upheaval is the result.

**Hegemonic Instability**

The dominant view among American policymakers and Security Studies scholars is that unipolarity - and with it U.S. primacy (or hegemony) - can be perpetuated far into the future. In other words, it is thought that that primacy is durable. This view reflects the belief that an imbalance of power in the international system favoring the U.S., is more conducive to peace than a balance of power (an equal distribution of power) between two great powers (bipolarity),

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or among three or more great powers (multipolarity). The twofold core logic behind this thinking is simple. First, in international politics a hegemonic great power is the biggest, toughest dude on the block. Hegemons are, like Leroy Brown: “badder than old King Kong, and meaner than a junkyard dog.” Thus - or so it is asserted - a hegemon’s preponderance of power ensures others will not want to tangle with it. Hence, the international political system will be peaceful. As its proponents see it, one of unipolarity’s big advantages is that eliminates the competitive - possibly war-causing - dynamics that typically characterize great power politics. After all, or it is claimed - if there is only one great power, by definition great power politics cannot exist because there are no states strong enough to challenge the unipole’s preeminence. In such a world, great power politics s replaced by unipolar - or hegemonic - politics. Thus, the second pillar of unipolar stability is based on what is known as hegemonic stability theory (which was articulated by scholars of International Political Economy). According to this logic, the intimidating effect of American military power is not the only - or necessarily the most important - reason that other states shy away resisting U.S. dominance of the international system. Rather, or so the argument goes, other states willingly accept American hegemony because they reap major security and economic benefits from it.

The argument for continuing U.S. primacy - unipolar stability - is weak. In fact, all hegemonic systems - including the post-Cold War unipolar system dominated by the United States - are transient. Regardless of the label - primacy, hegemony, unipolar politics - periods where power is over-concentrated in the hands a single state are interludes that never last. To put

25 TBA - Explain IR theory debate on whether UP, BP or MP systems are the most stable and peaceful.
it somewhat differently, unipolar politics is nothing more than a warm up for the return to great power politics. To demonstrate why this is so, I construct a theory of Hegemonic Instability (HIT). My starting point is that no hegemonic system, not even unipolarity - truly cancels out that great power politics. To put it another way, in every hegemonic system - even a unipolar one - great power politics is bubbling just below the surface. In all hegemonic systems - even a unipolar one - there are “great powers in-waiting” that sooner or later will step up to the plate and take their swings at the reigning hegemon. Great power politics temporarily may be absent in a unipolar system it always is immanent.

Great power politics is characterized by two opposing tendencies. First, there have been successive attempts by leading great powers to gain hegemony - dominance - of the international system. Second, bids for hegemony are resisted, and, thwarted, by the opposition of the other great powers. This was the story during the era when the Continent was the fulcrum of geopolitics politics (1500-1945). And while they may be temporary submerged during a unipolar interlude, the same factors that lead to the defeat of hegemons (actual or aspiring) resurface to overthrow the unipole and reestablish a balance of power.

Hegemonic Instability theory incorporates the six bedrock realist principles discussed above, and rests on its own foundation of six core assumptions. First, any time a great power is perceived as becoming too powerful - that is, aiming for hegemony - other states become apprehensive. For good reason, because when a single, over-mighty great power wields excessive military and economic clout, the security and autonomy - and survival - of the others is potentially at risk. Great powers that try for hegemony are seeking absolute security for

Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance*
themselves. However, although dominance is good for the hegemon, it constitutes a potentially existential threat to the other major powers. Hence, if it looks as if a single great power has a shot at attaining hegemony, at least some of the others will try to stop it from succeeding. In this respect, geopolitics mimics Newton’s Third Law that every action produces an equal and opposite reaction.

Second, this push back is what strategic studies scholars refer to as “balancing.” Specifically, it is counter-hegemonic balancing. The image of a scale usefully illustrates counter-hegemonic balancing: when there is too much weight on one side (that of the actual, or aspiring, hegemon), weight is put on the other side to restore equipoise. As Waltz said, “In international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads other states to balance against it.” If they value their survival, weaker great powers will not align themselves (“bandwagon”) with the dominant great power for the same reason smart people avoid riding tigers. While there is always the outside chance that the tiger may turn out to be a nice kitty, the more likely result is that the rider will become the tiger’s dinner.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the pretty much ironclad rule of great power

27 During the late 1790's, led by Napoleon Bonaparte, Revolutionary France: extended its power into Germany, conquered most of the Italian Peninsula, invaded Egypt, waged an aggressive war at sea against British commerce, and tried to support an Irish rebellion against British rule. Paris claimed its strategy was defensive. But, as Brendan Simms observes: “In practice, there was little difference between defensive and offensive here: the absolute security of France could only be achieved through the absolute insecurity of all her neighbours far and near.” Brendan Simms, Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, 1453 to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 2013), p. 156.

28 Waltz, Theory of International Politics; TBA - other balancing cites.

politics in the modern international system is that hegemony begets resistance: whenever one state becomes too powerful, others will act - singly or in concert - to offset the over-concentration of power in its hands, thereby restoring equilibrium to the international political system. And, to repeat, this means that in unipolar systems new great powers will emerge as counter-weights to the hegemon. States balance by building up their own military capabilities (“internal balancing”), forming counter-hegemonic alliances or coalitions with others (“external balancing”), or -typically - by a combination of external and internal balancing. The historical record holds a grim lesson for great powers seeking preponderance in the international system: the fate of hegemons -and hegemon wannabes - is defeat and failure. It was not by accident that the hegemonic bids of the Habsburgs (under Charles V and Philip II), France (under Louis XIV and Napoleon), and Germany (under Wilhelm II and Adolph Hitler) all were repulsed.

The pattern of hegemonic bids and counter-hegemonic balancing is not without its puzzles and ironies. It is Grand Strategy 101 that states amass power to gain security against their rivals. Great powers tend to think like the Duchess of Windsor: they can never be too big, too powerful, or too well armed. Paradoxically, however, when a state becomes too powerful, insecurity is the result - not security. This is both because others combine against them, and because they over-expand and become, as the Yale historian Paul Kennedy put it, “imperially overstretched.” Simply put, great powers play to win, but if they win too much, they lose. So, given the track record of hegemonic failure, why do great powers bid for hegemony?

With the exception of the United States (a subject to which we will return), all of the states that unsuccessfully reached for hegemony were European great powers during the pre-1945

30 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*
era when international politics was multipolar and still Euro-centric. Specifically, they all were continental land powers that lived in close proximity to menacing - often predatory - neighbors. For these great powers, geography was a powerful stimulus to seek security through hegemony. Unsurprisingly, great power politics in Europe was chippy (as they sometimes have reason to say on Hockey Night in Canada). Jammed into Europe’s geographically confined space, each of the great powers feared that it could fall victim to its rivals. Policymakers living in a never-ending state of apprehension, and existential threat, found seductive the cardinal principle of “offensive realism:” the best way to gain security is to eliminate the competition (or reduce competitors’ power to a point where they no longer pose a threat).31 These great powers sought, in effect, to become “security monopolists.”

Notwithstanding the record of hegemonic failure, successive states were prepared to gamble that they would be the exception to the rule and succeed where other would-be hegemons had failed. They believed they could establish their dominance before their rivals could react. In polici-speak, they believed that “collective action problems” would prevent others from timely and effectively collaborating to oppose their hegemonic ambitions. For Europe’s great powers, hegemony was the Holy Grail of geopolitics, because, if attained, it held out the promise of absolute security. Of course, as Henry Kissinger once noted, absolute security for one state means absolute insecurity for the others, which pretty much sums up why aspiring hegemons are resisted. The tragic nature of great power politics - highlighted by Thucydides, Hans Morgenthau and John Mearsheimer - lies in the fact although hegemony-seeking is a rational

strategy for a great power attempting to break out of the so-called “security dilemma,” it
provokes others to defend themselves by opposing the hegemon.\textsuperscript{32} To put it a bit differently,
great power politics is shaped by the clash of two opposing ideas about security. From time to
time, one of the great powers will conclude that the road to security lies in becoming a hegemon.
For the others, however, the path to survival and security requires a more or less equal
distribution of power among all of the great powers.\textsuperscript{33}

This leads to HIT’s third assumption: even in a unipolar world - where by definition there
is only a single great power - balancing dynamics are still present if only latently Inevitably there
will be at least one state that is a “great power-in-waiting” - a state that has the potential of
ascending to great power rank. Great powers-in-waiting have strong incentives to ascend to
actual great power status, and balance against the hegemon. It is the effect of uneven growth
rates that enables the rise of new great powers. As Paul Kennedy noted, time and again in
international politics, relative “economic shifts heralded the rise of new Great Powers which one
day would have a decisive impact on the military/territorial order.”\textsuperscript{34}

The competitiveness of the international political system galvanizes great powers-in-
waiting to emerge as full-fledged great powers. If they fail to do so, they will be punished; the
dominant power(s) will throttle their rise, and strip away their autonomy. The lesson for great

\textsuperscript{32} Thucydides, \textit{History of the Peloponnesian Wars}; Hans Morgenthau, \textit{Politics Among
Nations}; John Mearsheimer, \textit{Tragedy of Great Power Politics}.

\textsuperscript{33} It is sometimes said that the “balance of power” helps to ensure peace. This is not true. However, a balance of power - a rough equality of military capabilities among the great powers - maximizes each great power’s chances of survival by ensuring it won’t be gobbled up in a Pac-Man like fashion by a hegemon.

\textsuperscript{34} Kennedy, \textit{Rise and Fall}, p. xxii.
powers-in waiting is to rise as quickly as possible; first by economic self-strengthening, and then by converting their newly gained wealth into military power. After all, the best way to rein-in a hegemon is for a great power-in-waiting to step up to the great power ranks, and establish itself as a countervailing pole of power in the international political system. The fate of 19th century China - which saw the European powers divide the nation into spheres of influence even as they assumed oversight of the key functions of the government in Peking - is illustrative of what happens to great powers-in-waiting that fail to develop their latent power. 35 21st century China has learned from history in this respect.

All highly competitive realms - for example, business and sports - exert pressure on the actors to emulate the successful security strategies of their rivals. As Kenneth Waltz observes, “competition produces a tendency toward sameness of the competitors.” 36 Baseball fans can easily grasp the underlying logic here. In the early 2000s, under general manager Billy Beane, the theretofore woebegone Oakland Athletics became the first team to systematically employ advanced statistical methods both for scouting, and on-the-field strategy. At the time, this was seen as a radical departure from standard operating procedure for major league clubs. 37 The A’s were forced into becoming the first-mover because economic constraints limited their ability to compete against the big market teams like the New York Yankees, and Boston Red Sox by signing high-priced free agents. Beane’s innovations were so successful that virtually every


36 Waltz, Theory of International Politics, p. 127.

major league team now employs “analytics” in order to keep pace with - and seek and advantage over - the competition. Great power politics from 1880 to 1914 nicely illustrates the sameness effect in action. To offset Britain’s hegemonic power, the two biggest emerging great powers - the United States and Germany - followed the British playbook by: rapid industrialization, building big navies, seeking overseas markets, engaging in empire-building abroad.  

Similarly, To avoid China’s fate of being gobbled up by Britain and the other European great powers, after 1868 Meiji Japan transformed itself economically, administratively, and militarily into a Western-style great power, and sought to create its own empire and sphere of influence in China, Manchuria, and Korea.

The “sameness effect” does not mean competitors will copy-cat each other, or seek to become identical twins. It does mean, however, that states will broadly emulate their rivals successful preactice, including military strategies, weapons, technology and - importantly - administrative and organizational techniques that enhance that state’s capacity to extract resources from society, and effectively convert them into military power. While states may adapt, or tailor, these to meet their own particular needs and circumstances, as a general rule if their rivals develop effective, innovative instruments of competition, a state must follow suit or risk falling behind.

For great powers-in-waiting - especially in a unipolar world - the imperatives of survival and security impel them to match, or offset, the capabilities of the dominant power. In theory,

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39 TBA- Japan cites.
great powers-in-waiting could elect to forgo the process of great power emergence, and remain in the second rank. In reality, the competitive pressures of great power politics foreclose that option. “States are free to make choices,” Indiana University professors Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson observe, “but their choices are shaped by the structures and history they and their predecessors have made.” Of course, there is a difference between trying to move up, and actually being successful in attaining great power status. Great powers-in-waiting that try to enter the first rank sometimes fail.

Once again, the fate of 19th century China offers a useful insight. The ruling Qing dynasty was fully alive to the threats posed by the imperial depredations of the European great powers (and by the late 19th century, Japan), and the centrifugal domestic forces that were assailing China, and weakening the control of the central government. The Qing tried to respond to these pressures with a series of military, economic, and governmental reforms. Obviously, they failed, and China paid a huge price for that failure. The point here is that the process of great power emergence results from the interaction of external pressures and internal responses. External threat is only half the story of great power emergence. The other half is the ability of great powers-in-waiting to develop internal policies that will enable them to enter the great power ranks.

Great powers-in-waiting are never held back by a lack of resources. By definition, they have the latent tools to become full-fledged great powers. What can trip them up is the “paradox

of unrealized power.” The state needs to develop the political and institutional structures that will enable it to efficiently extract material resources from society, and convert its latent power into the kind of actual material capabilities its needs to sustain a great power grand strategy. In other words, “state capacity” is the essential pre-requisite for great powers-in-waiting to move from the second division to the premier league (and also for extant great powers to remain in the premier league). In this sense, as Charles Tilly noted, external threat is a powerful stimulus to state building. States that fail to develop robust state capacity are likely - as Qing China did - to fall by the wayside in the hardball world of great power politics.

41 David A. Baldwin, “Power Analysis and World Politics: New Trends Versus Old Tendencies,” World Politics. 31:2 (January 1979), pp. 163-194,


43 In Tilly’s widely quoted aphorism, “war made the state, and the state made war.” He demonstrated how the need to gain security from external threat drove the states of early modern Europe to develop the administrative and bureaucratic structures necessary for raising, maintaining, supplying, and paying for permanent military establishments. For a good overview of the link between external threat state building, see Michael C. Desch, “War and Strong States, Peace and Weak States?” International Organization. 50:2 (Spring 1996), pp. 237-268.

44 As Theda Skocpol has argued, the regimes of great powers (and potential great powers) may fall victim to revolutionary unrest if they fail to compete effectively against external rivals. This was the fate of Bourbon France, Romanov Russia, and Qing China. Skocpol observes that: “In late-eighteenth century France, early-twentieth century Russia, and mid-nineteenth century China alike, the monarchies of the Old Regime proved unable to implement sufficiently basic reforms or to promote rapid enough economic development to meet and weather the particular intensity of military threats from abroad that each regime had to face. And revolutionary political crises emerged precisely because of the unsuccessful attempts of the Bourbon, Romanov, and Manchu [Qing] regimes to cope with foreign pressures.” Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolution: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 50. Brendan Simms also argues that external
Fourth, great powers-in-waiting emerge from their chrysalis phase as new, rising great powers. There is a pattern to great power rise. First, they adopt policies of domestic economic development and state-building. Second, as they become wealthier, rising great powers acquire important stakes in overseas markets and raw materials, access to which they need to protect by building power projection capabilities. Third, rising great powers seek to dominate their own geographical backyards.\(^{45}\) That, after all, is what the “struggle for mastery in Europe” was all about from 1500 to 1945, and it is what the looming early 21\(^{st}\) century “struggle for mastery in Asia” is about.\(^{46}\) Fourth, as their material capabilities become more robust, rising great powers broaden the definition of their security requirements, and the geographic scope of their interests. As Zakaria observes, a rising great power’s “definition of security, of the interests that require protection, usually expand in tandem with a nation’s material capabilities.”\(^{47}\) In other words, the intentions and ambitions of ascending great powers are fueled by their growing military and economic muscle. That is, the more clout rising great powers have, the more influence they want over the international political system. As Robert Gilpin observes, “As the power of a state threat was the stimulus for the French Revolution. While acknowledging the there were multiple causes of the revolution, the major factor was a perceived need to arrest French geopolitical decline and restore its power and prestige. As he says “the principal driving force was a determination to make French society better able to support the re-establishment of national greatness on the European scene.” Brendan Simms, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, From 1453 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books), p. 143


\(^{47}\) Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, pp. 184-185.
increases, it seeks to extend its territorial control, its political influence, and/or its domination of the international economy.” Rising great powers seek out, and seize, opportunities to exert their influence because their strengthened capabilities reduce the costs of expansion, and increase the odds of success. Fifth, as their geopolitical footprint grows, they rub up against the interests of the entrenched dominant power. This generates friction between the established dominant power and the rising challenger, and that sparks competition between them for power, influence, control, and status.

Zakaria has neatly tied these strands together, and summarized the phenomenon of great power rise:

Over the course of history, states that have experienced significant growth in their material resources have relative soon redefined and expanded theri political interests, measured by their increases in military spending, initiation of wars, acquisition of territory, posting of soldiers, and diplomats, and participation in great power decisionmaking. The bottom line here is inevitably rising great powers will be dissatisfied with the prevailing international status quo, which reflects the interests of the dominant great power(s). Rising new great powers enter a world where the dominant -status quo - power has allocated territory, economic leverage, and prestige, and set the international system’s institutions, norms, and rules. Ascending new great powers flex their muscles to change the prevailing status quo. Here is

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49 Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, p. 3
where the impact of relative power shifts is felt. “The critical significance of the differential growth of power among states,” Gilpin says, “is that it alters the cost of changing the international system, and therefore the incentives for changing the international system.”

As the move up the power rankings, rising great powers want a bigger piece of the geopolitical pie. And, as they close the power gap with the dominant power, the rising great powers insist on baking a new pie of geopolitical and economic perks and privileges - a pie that is more to their own liking. It may be slightly overstating the case - but only slightly - to say that rising great powers are - as the rock band Steppenwolf put it - “born to be wild.” But for sure, they are likely to upset the geopolitical apple cart by aiming to overthrow the old order and establish a new one.

Fifth, in addition to boosting their hard (military and economic) power, rising new great powers want to be accorded status and prestige equal to that of the leading great power. In this sense, rising great powers are practitioners of the Aretha Franklin Doctrine: while for sure they want power, they also want R-E-S-P-E-C-T from the dominant power. The contest for status and prestige is a crucial - but too often overlooked - trigger mechanism for great power rivalry. To be sure, great power grand strategies are driven by fear of others and the quest for security. But they are driven equally by their desire to be respected; that is, to gain status and prestige. As the ancient Greek historian Thucydides wrote in his *History of the Peloponnesian*, the policies of great powers reflect their concerns about fear and the preservation - and enhancement - of their

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interests, and their concern of their honor.\textsuperscript{52} Later in the book, I show that Wilhelmine Germany’s demands for status and prestige equal to Great Britain’s - and London’s refusal to grant it - was a critical factor causing the outbreak of World War I, and a similar dynamic is driving today’s Sino-American relationship.

Sixth, and last, if the relative power gap between the incumbent hegemon and a rising challenger(s) narrows significantly, “power transition” dynamics come into play.\textsuperscript{53} For Hegemonic Instability Theory, power transitions are where the rubber meets the road. Power transitions which are the geopolitical equivalent of a hurricane warning: a nasty storm is brewing. Power transitions are easily visualized. Imagine side by side up and down escalators. The incumbent hegemon is on the down escalator, and the rising challenger on the up escalator. As they approach each other heading in opposite directions, one them leaps over the rail to the opposite side and begins pummeling the other. What explains the outbreak of this fight? On this point, there is a big “inside baseball” debate among scholars about how the power transitions operate that centers on three questions: who, when, and why?

When A. F. K. Organski initially formulated power transition theory, he argued that conflict would be instigated by the rising challenger when it achieved power parity with the

\textsuperscript{52} Thucydides, \textit{History of the Peloponnesian War}, TBA

declining hegemon. This formulation is theoretical sibling of offensive realism and unipolar stability theory, each of which contends great power conflict is less like when there is an over-concentration of power favoring the dominant, or hegemonic, power. Faced with such a power asymmetry, the weaker great powers are deterred from war, because they fear they would be defeated by the dominant power’s superior military capabilities. The flip side of this argument is that great power conflict is more likely when parity exists between two or more great powers, which is commonly called a balance of power. When the odds are even, each of the great powers may believe victory is an achievable outcome.

In his subsequent iterations of power transition theory, Organski changed his mind, and claimed that the danger point occurs when the rising challenger has substantially narrowed - but not yet closed - the power gap with the declining hegemon. This logic of this argument is dubious, however. Before it has at least caught up with the declining dominant power, what incentive is there for the rising challenger to initiate conflict - and run the risk of defeat - with the declining hegemon? After all, if their respective power trajectories remain on track, to become the leading power, the challenger needs only be patient and let nature take its course. As University of Virginia professor Dale Copeland puts it, "there is no logical reason why a state should attack while it is still rising, since by simply waiting, the state will be able to achieve its objectives more easily, and at less cost."55

There are several possible explanations of why the rising challenger might strike before it has caught up or passed the declining hegemon. First, it always is difficult for great powers to

54 Organski, World Politics.

accurately gauge the distribution of capabilities between them and their rivals, and even more so when the differentials are small. So a rising challenger may instigate war in the mistaken belief that it has equaled or surpassed the declining dominant power. Second, even before it equals or passes the declining dominant power, the rising challenger may sense that it has a window of opportunity to change the prevailing distribution of power, and the existing international order.\footnote{56} Finally, fearing that the declining dominant power may launch a preventive war, the rising challenger may choose to strike the first blow itself.

Rather than focusing on the motives and actions of rising challengers, some scholars believe that it is the actions of the declining dominant power that explains why power transitions lead to war. Instead of fatally resigning itself to “going gently in that good night” and being knocked off its pedestal of geopolitical dominance, a declining hegemon may choose, as the poet Dylan Thomas put it, to “rage, rage, against the dying of the [hegemonic] light.” To understand the logic of this argument, football fans may recall Rainbow Man who, with his multi-colored Afro wig, would hold up a “John 3:16 placard” when the TV cameras fixed on him. If Rainbow Man had been thinking about international politics, his placard would have read “Gilpin: 191;” that is, page 191 of Robert Gilpin’s \textit{War and Change in International Politics}. In contrast to Organski, Gilpin says it is the declining dominant power that is responsible for instigting conflict. Gilpin: 191 posits that declining dominant powers are driven to preventive war because they believe the best way to deal with rising challengers is to “strangle the baby in the crib.”

Devotees of the *Soprano*’s television series understand Gilpin’s logic. During the *Soprano*’s penultimate season, mob boss Tony Soprano and his crew were worried about the threat posed by the New York City crime family led by Johnny Sack. One day, when Tony and his henchmen gathered in their headquarters, the Bada-Bing strip club, to discuss how to handle Johnny Sack, Paulie Walnuts, Tony’s chief lieutenant, famously said: “Clipping the guy is always an option.” The Pauly Walnuts Doctrine is just as applicable to international politics as it is to Mafia turf battles. In great power politics, during power transitions, “clipping the guy” is a go-to option in the grand strategic play-book of declining hegemons. As Gilpin says, for a declining hegemon “the first and most attractive response” is preventive war “to eliminate the source of the problem.”

Preventive war is a misnomer, of course, because it ensures war, rather than avoiding it. What it does prevent, however, is a situation where the declining hegemon is forced to fight when the balance of power has shifted against it. As Gilpin says, “By launching a preventive war the declining power destroys or weakens the rising challenger while the military advantage is still with the declining power.”

For declining dominant powers, the choice is not between war and peace, but between “waging war while the balance is still in [its] favor or waging war later when the tide may have turned against it.”

Security studies scholars may disagree about the answers to the who, when, and why questions, but they all agree that when power transitions loom, it’s a "Katy bar the door" moment in great power politics. Power transitions cause geopolitical upheaval because nothing less than

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59 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in International Politics*, p. 201.
the leadership, and nature, of the international order are up for grabs. At stake is which great
power will call the shots in international politics. As long as a single great power rules the roost,
great power politics tend to be stable. When there is hegemonic, or dominant, great power, the
disparity in military and economic capabilities between itself and the other great power invests it
with a high degree of security, and allows it to shape the international order, and formulate it
governing institutions, and rules. In this sense, an international order dominated by a hegemonic
(or near hegemonic) power is hierarchic, because there is a clear delineation between the
dominant power and the rest with respect to power, prestige, and influence. Needless to say,
hegemonic, or dominant, great powers like the hierarchic status quo in international politics,
because they are on top of the pecking order.

The great Negro League (and Hall of Fame) pitcher, Satchel Paige, once said, “Don’t look
back, something may be gaining on you.” In the competitive arena of international politics,
however, dominant great powers constantly are checking the rearview mirror to see whether
another great power is gaining on them. Paradoxically, the international political system can
simultaneously be both anarchic and hierarchic. A hegemon is not the same thing as a world
government - or as they used to say in the seventeenth century, a “universal monarchy” - which
has squashed all centers of resistance. Instead, although the competitive and power balancing
aspects of international politics are suppressed in a hierarchic system, they do not disappear. As
we have seen, invariably there are great powers-in-waiting that are biding their time until they
can become strong enough to take a shot at knocking the hegemon off its perch. In this sense,
power transitions are the most consequential manifestation of why changes in relative power are
so important. Over time, the effect of relative growth differentials kick-in, and a potential
challenger to the reining dominant power will emerge. When that happens, it’s a brand new ball game.

The existing international order - its distribution of power, institutions, rules, and norms - reflects the interests of the dominant power(s) that constructed it. Over time, however, one or more of the other great powers will be dissatisfied with this order. And, as the dominant state’s relative power atrophies, a rising challenger will emerge and challenge the prevailing order. To be sure, the dominant great power can try to postpone the day reckoning by providing public goods to other states in the realms of security and economics. By doing good for others, the hegemon influences them to acquiesce in its dominance, and to accept the existing international order. But this cannot go on indefinitely. Soon or later, because of the effect of growth rate differentials, over time the relative power gap between the dominant great power and at least one of the other great powers will narrow, and, when the gap shrinks enough, power transition dynamics kick-in. When war occurs between a declining dominant power and a rising challenger, the cause “is to be found in sizes and rates of growth of the members of the international system.”60

Rising challengers are ambitious. The have, as William Shakespeare wrote of Cassius in his play Julius Caesar, ”a lean and hungry look.” Power transitions are powder kegs because they are about the very nature of the international order. Will the declining dominant power be able to preserve what for it is a beneficial status quo, or will the upstart challenger overthrow the old international order, and replace new one that advances its interests? Power transitions, thus, are about whether the status quo can prevail over the forces of geopolitical revisionism. 

60 Organski and Kugler, The War Ledger, p. 29
rising challengers near parity with the declining dominant power, invariably their dissatisfaction with the existing international order bubbles up. After all, the existing order was constructed by the declining dominant power during better days to privilege its own interests. Rising challengers want to revise the existing order and bring it into line with what they perceive are the new relative power realities. The seek, as Gilpin said “to change the international system in order to advance their own interests.”

In the abstract, power transitions can be resolved peacefully by using diplomacy to reconcile the rising challenger’s demands for change in the hierarchies of power, prestige, and influence with the dominant state’s desire to hang on to as much of its heretofore privileged position as possible. But in the real world the competing interests of the status quo and revisionist powers are seldom accommodated. For the declining great power, the prospect of a power transition poses a difficult grand strategic dilemma. Should it attempt to preserve its primacy, and the existing international order - which means being willing to go to war to slap-down the challenger - or should it try to avoid war by accepting the inevitability that the challenger will supplant it as the leading state in the system, and replace the existing international order with a new one that reflects its own preferences? The onus for avoiding conflict lies with the declining hegemon, because rising challengers are confident that the geopolitical tide is flowing in their direction. Accordingly, they adhere to the Burger King doctrine: they want to have it their way, and see little need make significant concessions to the declining dominant

61 Both Organski, *World Politics*, and Gilpin, *War and Change* highlight the importance of the rising power(s) dissatisfaction with the status quo

power. A declining hegemon, on the other hand, can avoid war by accommodating the rising challenger; that is, by giving up some of its power. This is a choice declining dominant powers seldom make, however. Inevitably, they view the risks of “appeasement” as greater than the risk of using force to stop the rising challenger.

Perceptive readers are already ahead of the game at this point, and asking if the evolving Sino-American relationship represents a power transition in-the-making. This is a subject to which I will return. In the next chapter, however, I present an historical overview of great power politics to show that the historical record supports the explanatory framework of great power rise and decline outlined in this chapter, especially with regard to: the fragility of unipolar/hegemonic systems; the prevalence of power balancing behavior by great powers; the salience of relative power shifts; and the effect of power transition dynamics.