

Questioning the Theory of Hegemonic Continuum¹

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When looking at the future of democracy, one has to take into account human history. Over the thousands of years of recorded history, we see that states or empires are born, they grow and they disappear. Either they collapse or they are taken over by more powerful states and empires.

– Hans-Adam II, Reigning Prince of the Principality of Liechtenstein
(Global Agenda 2006)

Hegemonic Continuum

Throughout history, one of the enduring features of the international order has been the presence of a nation-state that, by virtue of its military prowess, economic leverage, and political clout, accreted a sufficiently disproportionate share of global influence as to earn the title of “superpower” or “empire.” Conventional wisdom maintains that evolving power dynamics will, in some form, preserve this geopolitical asymmetry.

Indeed, even though the United States will likely remain the world’s predominant power for the foreseeable future, a growing body of scholarship aims to predict which state or coalition of states is poised to supplant it. With some notable exceptions, most of these analyses argue that China and the European Union (EU) are among the more plausible candidates. Thus, in February 2005 alone, two influential texts – *China, Inc.: How the Rise of the Next Superpower Challenges America and the World*, and *Why Europe Will Run the 21st century* – argued that China and the EU, respectively, are poised to fill the vacuum that waning American power is likely to create.

¹ I am grateful to Niall Ferguson, Laurence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard University, for encouraging me to develop the ideas that are contained in this paper, while warning me that one must exercise great caution when prophesying the future. Any failure to heed his recommendation is solely the fault of this author. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to Nazli Choucri, Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who, in addition to being generous with her time and enthusiasm, has agreed to supervise my continued research on the topics that this paper explores.

While historical precedent appears to validate the theory of “hegemonic continuum,” important trends suggest that the end of the United States’ reign atop the world may well conclude the era in which a superpower necessarily prevails. I hasten to note, lest the reader misinterpret my argument, that this prediction is not tantamount to envisioning the dissolution of the nation-state as the principal functional unit of the international order. With some notable exceptions (like Kenichi Ohmae’s *Next Global Stage: The Challenges and Opportunities in Our Borderless World*), most analysts of globalization believe that they will exist for quite some time. Some scholars even argue that international economic integration is compelling states to become more engaged and proactive, so that they may better safeguard their constituencies against the unexpected economic oscillations.

However, if the outcome that I have suggested does come to pass, it would represent a significant departure from past history, and would entail great uncertainty. The sparse literature that hazards a prediction as to the state of the world without a dominant power, typically expresses great alarm. Michael Mandelbaum believes that “The alternative to the role the United States plays in the world is not better global governance, but less of it – and that would make the world a far more dangerous and less prosperous place” (2006, 55). Niall Ferguson echoes this argument, but in more sobering language: “Unfortunately, the alternative to a single superpower is not a multilateral utopia, but the anarchistic nightmare of a new Dark Age” (2006, 32).

I am neither knowledgeable enough of history, nor sufficiently confident in my predictive capabilities to render as unequivocal a judgment as Ferguson and Mandelbaum issue. As such, I simply explore the factors that make the emergence of a successor unlikely (an investigation that, surprisingly, few scholars or policymakers have undertaken to pursue). To this end, I scrutinize the internal problems that each potential competitor is primed to experience in forthcoming decades, and discuss the increasingly important roles of transnational phenomena such as global public opinion.

China: The Fallacy of Extrapolation

Of all the countries or coalitions that could theoretically ascend to the position of global superpower, China elicits the most intensive scrutiny, and arouses the greatest disquiet. Specifically, if one sees through an economic prism, foisting such attention on it appears justified. During 2005, its economy grew by nearly 10%, and with a current Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$2.26 trillion, its economy is now the world’s fourth largest (Bradsher 2006, A1). Indeed, many of the discussions at this year’s World Economic Forum centered on its remarkable growth and increasing influence, with one prominent American banker speaking of

a “fundamental shift in the center of gravity” in the international economic architecture (Weber 2006). Placing China’s current achievements within the context of its economic trajectory since 1979, one is impressed by the rapidity with which it has asserted itself as a central actor on the global stage. It is important to evaluate these and other such facts within a more holistic framework. In particular, there are three important characteristics of China’s ascent that have not been analyzed in sufficient detail:

- i. The influence that it does possess principally, if not exclusively, derives from its economic clout.
- ii. Certain aspects of its growth path are cause for concern.
- iii. China confronts a host of internal crises whose ramifications are beginning to manifest.

To further explore these arguments, I adhere to the conventional tripartite conception of power: military, economic, and political (although I later add another lens). While China has recently begun to augment its military capabilities, the United States is likely to retain a significant advantage not only over any forces that it could muster, but also over the combined forces that any proposed countervailing coalition could marshal (Schwarz 2005, 27-28). An independent task force on Chinese military power concluded that “the balance between the United States and China, both globally and in Asia, is likely to remain decisively in America’s favor beyond the next twenty years” (Segal 2003, vi). Politically, although it is certainly an important player, it is unlikely to be able to exert a meaningful leadership role while practicing communist governance and capitalist economics. Indeed, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the attendant defeat of collectivist ideologies, communism is unlikely to experience a widespread renaissance. Democratic governance appears primed to continue, although its diffusion is certainly not guaranteed, and it is bound to experience resistance (the resurgence of socialism in key South American countries is an important exception).

While China’s military and political weaknesses are more apparent, its economic foibles are not entirely concealed. Unfortunately, mainstream discourse tends to accord primacy to absolute figures rather than relative measures or underlying trends. Thus, per capita GDP (PCGDP), while itself a crude indicator of a country’s standard of living, is more revealing than GDP. In 2005, the United States ranked fourth in the world, with a PCGDP of \$41,800; China ranked 118th, with a PCGDP of \$6,200 (Central Intelligence Agency 2006). In that same year, the

United States ranked tenth in the world as measured by its human development index; China ranked 85th (Denny 2006, 220). Furthermore, while income inequality appears to be growing in both countries, it is more pronounced in China, with wealth increasingly concentrating in urban populations (*The Economist* 2003, 25-26).

Even supposing that one does not incorporate these figures into one's analysis, history should remind one that extraordinary economic growth eventually reaches a terminus, which often proves to be quite painful. Recall that in the aftermath of the Second World War, Hong Kong, Singapore, and other "tigers" experienced what many economists deemed "miraculous" growth. Indeed, East Asia expanded robustly (and rather smoothly) for nearly four decades before devolving into crisis in 1997. Whether or not the analogy between this example and China's current growth path is wholly legitimate, it is sufficiently accurate to warn one against excessive exuberance.

As the above discussion reveals, China is unlikely to emerge as a counterweight to the United States in the near to intermediate future. Presume, however, for argument's sake, that enough time had passed that it had indeed arrived at this position. Even then, it would have to confront myriad, complex challenges, most of which either do not exist, or are not nearly as acute in the United States. That corruption is endemic to the Chinese government has been widely noted, although its potential ramifications have not been properly examined. One scholar warns of "systemic risks in Chinese domestic politics that, if poorly managed, could explode, threatening the survival of the regime" (Pei 2005 56). Furthermore, China's crucial reliance on other countries to provide for its basic demands, such as energy consumption, will constrain any expansionist tendencies that it may harbor. Consider that, in 2003, its imports of metals, fossil fuels, and other natural resources accounted for approximately 60% of its combined imports (Department of Defense 2003, 10). China also faces tremendous demographic challenges, perhaps the most grave of which is a rapidly spreading AIDS epidemic. In 2002, the United Nations warned that "China is on the verge of a catastrophe that could result in unimaginable human suffering, economic loss and social devastation" (UN Theme Group on HIV / AIDS in China 2002, 7). Finally, as if its extraordinarily high population density were not the source of enough problems, China's overall population is aging more rapidly than any other country in history (Kahn 2004, A1). One analyst notes that these

domestic liabilities could bring China's economic expansion to a halt...It remains to be seen if Beijing will be able to do enough to stave off the domestic threats to its presumed assumption as regional hegemon (Wolfe 2005).

Most of the analyses, that foresee China's emergence as world superpower improperly extrapolate its current growth patterns and neglect to consider important undercurrents that have started to bubble. As such, considering the depth of Sino-American economic synergy, attempts to reverse or contain its growth would prove inimical to the United States' interests. Of the many insights that globalization has imparted, one of the most important is that the "zero-sum game" mentality that appears to underpin alarm over other countries' gains, economic and otherwise. This notion rests on fallacious laurels. Following World War II, the United States worked to construct a liberal international order by establishing institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. While doing so, it consolidated its power while helping to raise the standard of living of a wide segment of the global population. Indeed, so long as the United States sustains its own growth, it stands to accrue considerable dividends from others' progress (Berger 2006).

The EU: Division as a Source of Weakness

If any country or coalition were to supplant the United States, the EU (EU) would be the most likely candidate. With a combined GDP over \$12.3 trillion, and a common currency, the Euro, that increasingly competes with the dollar, it serves as an appreciable counterweight to the United States. With 25 member countries, the EU comprises the most important segment of the international community; exerting more influence than any other regional bloc in legitimizing or discrediting American engagement abroad.² However, in the highly unlikely event of transatlantic confrontation, its military capabilities would be incapable of competing with those of the United States.

Of greater importance, however, is that the EU does not oftentimes behave like a uniform bloc. Indeed, even in member states where nationalist sentiment is not particularly pronounced, people have not completely, or even largely, forged supranational identities. The EU's recent failures to pass a constitutional referendum and create a budget affirm the existence of important fissures within the European community. It is unlikely that the superimposition of a unifying architecture will neatly resolve those differences. Furthermore, as history reveals, countries can neither achieve greatness nor sustain it if their citizens are unable to put aside differences in times of need and project a common voice. The National Intelligence Council summarizes these arguments: "The extent to which Europe enhances its clout on the world stage depends on its ability to achieve

² Romania and Bulgaria are set to join the EU in 2007.

greater political cohesion” (Hutchings 2004, 57). The United States should welcome Europe’s ascent onto the world stage, and view it as an opportunity to restore traditionally robust transatlantic ties that have loosened as a result of misgivings over the war in Iraq.

Historical Precedent and an Evolving Definition of Power

The first important clue that the world of the future may not contain a superpower is the low probability of China’s or the EU’s assuming that position. Somewhat paradoxically, history reveals the second clue. I say “paradoxically” because, although great powers have continued to emerge, the interregnum between each one’s rise and fall has declined with time. The Roman Empire lasted for approximately 1500 years. The Ottoman Empire lasted for approximately 600 years. The British Empire lasted for approximately 400 years. The United States, the world’s lone superpower (though not an empire), confronts important challenges to its dominance merely 60 years after assuming this position.³ Barring an unforeseen geopolitical perturbation, this interval will likely approach zero: the world will eventually transition from an era in which some degree of power asymmetry exists to one in which rough multipolarity prevails. This quasi-mathematical argument, while overly simplistic, is nonetheless instructive.

Paralleling this decline in the tenure of each superpower’s reign is an increasingly complex definition of power. In the days of the Roman Empire, territorial acquisition was a central imperative that conferred upon the conquering state increased economic leverage and political clout. Indeed, a country’s standing largely correlated to its military power. The concept of an international community and the notion of tailoring one’s policies to the whims of global public opinion, did not become central considerations until after internecine destruction laid waste to much of the industrialized world. Today, as a result, the relationship between military preponderance and other forms of power is not nearly as facile.

In order to explain why such is the case, I need to enrich the traditional formulation of power to include a fourth, increasingly important lens: that which centers on the ability to control information, as well as the communications technologies through which it is disseminated. This ability could be described as information power. With the increasing availability of cellular phones, the growth of satellite television, and especially the advent of the Internet, the global

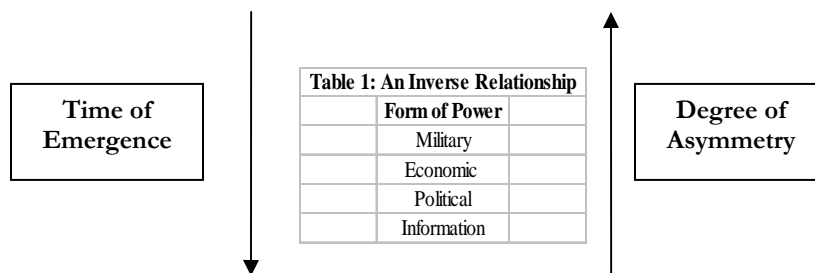
³ To see why the term “empire” inaccurately characterizes the United States, see Nye, Jr., Joseph S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

communications revolution is entrusting a multiplicity of actors with this power, ranging from states to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to individuals. Accordingly, the least concentrated of the four forms of power. Indeed, there is a roughly inverse correlation between the point in history at which a given component of power acquired relative importance and the degree to which it is asymmetrically distributed.

Military power has been of importance for most of documented history. At present, it is disproportionately concentrated in the United States, which accounts for nearly half of global defense expenditures. Economic power emerged later, alongside the development of societal hierarchies, networks, and organizations. At present, it is largely concentrated in the United States, the EU, and Japan, which collectively constitute “The Triad.” With time, economic power will increasingly diffuse to nascent powers as well as to multinational corporations. Political power, in addition to emerging much more recently, is shared among myriad players, including individuals. Figures like Hugo Chávez and activists who protest the practices of the World Trade Organization have helped to nurture skepticism over the virtues of globalization and the economic ideologies that underpin it. Insofar as they challenge capitalism, and convince others to join their chorus of criticism, they possess tremendous political power. Furthermore, as noted earlier, information power is distributed among an effectively infinite number of players. Indeed,

Individuals from some of the most isolated corners of the world can now interact with the richest centers of civilization in an everyday fashion. Powers that were once the monopoly of nation-states – participation in international politics, control of transnational communications, credibility as sources of accurate information – are now being exercised by a much wider array of players (Bollier 2003, 1).

Table 1 encapsulates these opposing trends:



However, it could be argued that even this quartic conception is not fully tailored to the realities of the information age. Because the Internet is largely free of state control, and the costs of accessing it are virtually negligible, the rate at which it stores new content vastly exceeds that at which even the most powerful mechanisms of quality control could monitor that content's veracity. As such, truth and perception (which is oftentimes grounded in distortions or falsehoods) tend to become conflated in an age of information overload. The result is that, in addition to information power, there exists perception power. Possessing the former does not necessarily guarantee enjoying the latter. Indeed, if the link between the two forms of power were this simple, anti-Americanism would be substantially lower than it is today. Further exploring perception power lies beyond the scope of this paper and, accordingly, I return to earlier discussion.

As Table 1 illustrates, groups that, by traditional criteria, would be considered weak or ostracized are increasingly wielding information power to lessen the advantages that conventional forms of power confer on stronger states. This development has not gone unnoticed in Washington. The National Security Archive recently obtained a document known as *Information Operations Roadmap*, which outlines the Department of Defense's proposals to restore the United States' asymmetric dominion over information channels:

New strategies] should provide a future [electronic warfare] capability sufficient to provide maximum control of the entire electromagnetic spectrum, denying, degrading, disrupting, or destroying the full spectrum of globally emerging communications systems, sensors, and weapons systems dependant on the electromagnetic spectrum (Department of Defense 2003, 61).

As this statement implies, the increasing influence of global public opinion renders the probability of sustained power asymmetries quite limited, because it frustrates the ability of any one country to impose its objectives upon the international community. In a passionate, if somewhat strident, essay, one scholar celebrates its ascent to the position of "second superpower":

The second superpower, emerging in the 21st century, depends upon educated informed members...When the United States opts to avoid or undermine international institutions, the second superpower can harass and embarrass it with demonstrations and public education campaigns. The second superpower can put pressure on politicians around the world

to stiffen their resolve to confront the US government in any ways possible. And the second superpower can also target US politicians and work to remove at the polls those who support the administration's undercutting of international law (Moore 2003, 8).

Global public opinion is certainly not a monolith as this passage seems to convey. However, as years of detailed polling results have illuminated, it quite often opposes American foreign policy with a striking measure of uniformity.⁴

The pressing question becomes what the next geopolitical structure will look like. The following list, while by no means exhaustive, offers some important possibilities:

- i. The United States attempts to reestablish its hegemony.
- ii. Apolarity prevails, with nonstate actors; virtual forces, such as global public opinion; and global issues; all exerting disproportionate influence.
- iii. Tribalism, civil war, ethnic and religious conflict, terrorism, and other destructive forces prevail.
- iv. The central powers of the world consolidate their respective spheres of influence without interfering in others', but later attempt to project their influence across a wider arc. A damaging balance-of-power struggle ensues.
- v. The central powers of the world leverage their shared resources and geographic dispersion towards the resolution of global issues.
- vi. International organizations such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund attempt to exert greater influence, and establish a form of "global governance."

Depending on what framework of international relations one brings to bear, some of these outcomes are likely to appear more plausible than others. Under a realist

⁴ For a superb treatment of global public opinion's role in constraining American foreign policy, see Walt, Stephen. (2005). *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*. New York: W.W. Norton.

paradigm, for example, the first outcome might emerge, because the United States would like to restore the security and advantages that its former status conferred. By contrast, it is doubtful that the fifth outcome would materialize insofar as states' national interests diverge from those of the international community (Waltz 2000, 5-41). However, as globalization accelerates and the condition of a given country becomes increasingly dependent on that of others, the boundary between these two categories is likely to become more blurred. After all, while it is incorrect to surmise the dissolution of the nation-state as the international order's principal functional unit, it is reasonable to suggest that the nation-state *system* that the Peace of Westphalia established in the 17th century is increasingly subject to duress. By most constructs, the sixth outcome would be unlikely to prevail because international organizations do not exert influence beyond that which their member states provide.

In particular, the second and fourth scenarios warrant attention because elements of each are already emerging. Although there still exists passionate debate over the importance of global public opinion, there is a wide consensus in scholarly and policymaking circles that nonstate actors and global issues (chief among them climate change, the spread of infectious diseases, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the decentralization of terrorist networks) are exerting greater influence. From 1966 to 2000, in fact, the number of NGOs more than quadrupled from a little over 36,000 to approximately 154,000 (Gilding 2001). These organizations have helped to promote government accountability and transparency, as well as increase the non-military costs of implementing policies that violate international protocols on environmental standards and human rights. Some individuals believe that a world in which states were not the principal geopolitical determinants would engender chaos.⁵ Again, I refrain from rendering any such judgments, and move on to a brief discussion of the fourth construct. Emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil, while far from securing dominance in their respective spheres, have already exhibited ambitions to project global influence. Thus, President Clinton concluded that

...it is highly unlikely that we will be the only superpower and have the position we now occupy for more than another couple of decades...I think in 20 to 30 years' time – when we're still a very powerful nation but no longer striding the world like a colossus economically, politically, and militarily – we are very likely to be judged and dealt with based on how we

⁵ See, for example, Zbigniew Brzezinski *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the 21st Century*. (New York: Touchstone, 1993).

have used this unique moment in history when we do have this monopoly
(*The Harvard Political Review*, 2002).

I do not envisage the emergence of multiple superpowers as Clinton does, but reiterate here my belief that a multiplicity of states will likely constitute the power nexus of the future.⁶ For many, this prospect is as disconcerting (if not more) as apolarity. There is some basis for this alarm. After all, tensions between competing powers led to two global conflagrations in a little over three decades, each of which resulted in tremendous destruction. Noting the United States' increased preoccupation with prosecuting a global war against terrorism, Charles A. Kupchan expresses concern over the renewal of a similar specter:

The American era is alive and well, but the rise of alternative centers of power and a declining and unilateralist U.S. internationalism will ensure that it comes undone as this new century progresses – with profound geopolitical consequences. The stability and order that devolve from American preponderance will gradually be replaced by renewed competition for primacy...Pax Americana is poised to give way to a much more unpredictable and dangerous global environment. And the chief threat will come not from the likes of Osama bin Laden, but from the return of traditional geopolitical rivalry (2002, xvii).

With vastly more lethal military capabilities at their disposal, and continually becoming enmeshed in deeper networks of economic integration, states would appear to have little incentive to initiate a power struggle. This argument presumes a shared rationality among all of the actors who maintain a stake in advancing their interests, an assumption that some would consider naïve. In 1910, Norman Angell, articulated precisely this reasoning, noting that tremendous progress in communication

[had] put the half-dozen chief capitals of Christendom in closer contact financially, and [had] rendered them more dependent the one upon the other than were the chief cities of Great Britain less than a hundred years ago (1912, 52-53).

⁶ Thus, for example, Henry Kissinger argues that “[new world order] will contain at least six major powers — the United States, Europe, China, Japan, Russia, and probably India – as well as a multiplicity of medium-sized and smaller countries.” (*Diplomacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster 1974).

The destruction that would envelop the world a mere four years later directly contradicted Angell's logic. Although he would write another book in 1921, *The Fruits of Victory*, that attempted to illustrate how the First World War confirmed his earlier argument, it is widely believed that Angell failed to appraise states' more primitive instincts.

Indeed, even though scholars who have attempted to peer into the future have reached markedly different conclusions over the character that it is likely to possess, they largely share a sense of pessimism.⁷ Predicting, then, how the disparate scenarios that I have proposed will complement, impinge upon, or otherwise interact with, one another strikes me as an exercise of tremendous theoretical interest and practical importance, especially if the world is to be spared further ravage.

Conclusion

Superpowers have existed for most of recorded human history, and, as such, foreshadowing an era in which one does not exist would appear to be misguided. Indeed, America appears poised to retain its supremacy well through the 21st century. Military, the US possesses no legitimate rivals. Economically, it faces critical challenges, but nonetheless fuels globalization, and forms the bulwark of the international economic architecture. Politically, while it is oftentimes challenged, as measured by its representation in and influence over international organizations, it remains the world's central locus. I therefore distinguish myself from the "declinists," who believe that the United States is primed to succumb to imperial overstretch in the near to intermediate future. Having rendered this judgment, however, I would argue that American scholars and policymakers would be remiss to all together neglect analysis of a world in which the United States is no longer its anchor. At the very least, they should help to broaden the incipient branch of scholarship that develops and examines novel paradigms of international relations (an important one being *netpolitik*). For, as I have suggested in this paper, traditional

⁷ The most discussed and tendentious account of future geopolitics is Samuel Huntington's watershed conception of a "clash of civilizations." See his account, Samuel Huntington *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996). For a notable exception to the apprehension that informs Huntington's and others' accounts see, Francis Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992).

conceptions of power and geopolitics appear to be rusty. The time to refurbish or, if necessary, dispense of, them seems opportune.

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