

The Future of Power

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What international order will emerge after the United States' reign as world superpower concludes? This question may appear to exhibit ignorance of the current distribution of global power, for the United States' preponderance does not appear to be immediately imperiled. However, it recognizes an outcome that may well prevail in the forthcoming centuries, if not by the conclusion of the 21st. Accordingly, it is in the interest of American scholars and policymakers to give serious thought to its implications; it is, furthermore, very much in the interest of international scholars and policymakers to do the same, for the rest of the world's advancement very much correlates to ours. Secondly, on a more personal note, I am firmly of the belief that, however imperfect the exercise of American power may be, a world in which it is the principal force in international relations is one that I wish to inherit and bequeath to my children. It is this dual impetus that compelled me to more fully examine this question.

For brevity's sake, I will discuss in this paper only two sources of America's receding power:

- i. the declining utility of military force, concomitant with the growing influence of global public opinion; and
- ii. the international community's steady ascendance in the domains of economic and intellectual leverage.¹

I will conclude by offering some thoughts on the international power structures that may emerge.

The Declining Utility of Military Force

In 19th century Europe, *realpolitik* was the prevailing instrument of statecraft, as nation-states required the use of force and other instruments of hard power to achieve their central objectives.² They usually neglected the impact of their policies on the "international community" – if such an entity can be said to have meaningfully existed in this time. Rather, they focused on consolidating their defenses: while some wished only to defend their spheres of influence, other European nation-states wished to further project their power. It is not surprising, then, that from 1880 to 1914, the combined military and naval personnel of the eight great powers – the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Japan – nearly doubled, and that their combined warship tonnage nearly quintupled.³ In retrospect, however, it was these great pillars' irresponsible pursuit and accumulation of power that would lead to the destructive wars of the 20th century. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the world recognized that were the major power centers to again engage in such a catastrophic exercise in self-destruction, with even more powerful weapons at their disposal, the survival of all of human civilization would be imperiled (hence the issuance of the Russell-Einstein Manifesto in 1955).

1945 marked the first time in modern history that members of the international community consciously adopted common, rather than self-interested, objectives. The charter of the United Nations (UN) resolved "to unite [the world's] strength to maintain international peace and security" and "to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples." With the development of new international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the strengthening of existing ones like the UN, a compelling consensus emerged that all countries had a stake in, and stood to benefit from, addressing global issues such as widespread poverty, environmental degradation, and human exploitation. Mary Kaldor, Professor of Global Governance at the London School of Economics, elegantly affirms these principles:

As well as having declining utility, war has become increasingly illegitimate as a tool of policy. The Second World War was the last great devastating clash of military forces killing an unimaginable number of people. The illegitimacy of war was inscribed in the founding of the United Nations and the European Union, as well as the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials. Some scholars argue that globalisation is really about the emergence of a shared sense of humanity that is based on shared memories of a global war; in this sense both Hiroshima and the Holocaust helped to define the basis for the post-war emphasis on human rights.⁴

It follows directly from Kaldor's analysis that the principal instrument of warfare—armed force—is, too, increasingly irrelevant.

One of the most critical sources of this attenuating relevance is the ascendance of global public opinion. As the twin revolutions in information and communication progress, the pace at which technological capabilities are expanding is rivaled only by

the rate at which technological costs are falling. Consider that “between 1970 and 1999, as the capacity of a fingernail-size silicon chip grew from a few thousand transistors to 44 million, the cost of 1 megahertz of processing power fell 45,000-fold from \$7,600 to 17 cents.”⁵ The results of these trends have been nothing short of phenomenal. In 1991, fewer than ten million people had cellular phones; today, over 1.5 billion people do. According to the United States Department of Commerce, there were three million people with access to the Internet in 1993, the vast majority of whom resided in North America; in 2005, close to nine hundred million people had access to the Internet, only 25% of whom lived in North America.⁶ As astounding as these, and other such, statistics are, they do not illuminate the ramifications of the revolutions in information and communication for the resourcefulness of military power.

Broadly, they have set in motion a fundamental democratization, rivaled in scale and impact only by the introduction of the printing press in the middle of the 15th century.⁷ More specifically, they are allowing people from even the remotest corners of the world to access information and, more importantly, participate in vibrant discourse about issues of central concern to them. Consequently, the West (ostensibly the United States) no longer enjoys asymmetrical control over information and the central organs through which it is transmitted.

During the Cold War, public officials in both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized that prevailing in the battle of perceptions was of paramount importance, perhaps of even greater strategic value than securing an advantageous position in the arms race. By deploying radio programs such as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty, the United States gradually convinced the societies of the Eastern hemisphere that in the epic battle between democratic capitalism and despotic totalitarianism, the former would rightly triumph.⁸ With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and with it the apparent removal of any critical threat to the national security of the United States, American policymakers progressively invested less effort in disseminating their messages about critical issues to the global population. In between 1994 and 2001, in fact, government expenditures on public diplomacy declined by approximately 53%.⁹ Regrettably, this complacency prevailed at a time when the revolutions in information and communication were beginning to discernibly impact the geopolitical environment.

The sobering reality is that with the rise of alternative television news networks such as al-Jazeera, and especially with the growth of the Internet, the United States’ messages about critical issues such as terrorism and the importance of nurturing democratic movements do not resonate as widely or with as much power as they once did. In fact, as poll after poll reveals, even the people of countries that we count among our closet allies view the United States’ statements with skepticism and, quite often, hostility. In the past, when the world’s primary sources of information were based in the United States, the world was, naturally, more inclined to accept our message. Now,

however, that members of global community have their own, independent sources of information, sources that often contradict the United States’ point of view; and mediums that allow them to exchange information with others; they are far more incredulous, and capable of offering independent analyses of American foreign policy.

One can gage just how powerful global public opinion has become by comparing the international community’s reaction to the United States’ two engagements in Iraq, the first of which concluded in 1991, and the second of which commenced in 2003. Both President George H.W. Bush and his son, George W. Bush, sought the removal of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorial regime; both cited, as a pretext, the threat that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction posed; and both spoke of a desire to spread democracy in the Middle East. In both cases, public officials offered disingenuous or dubious evidence to support their claim that Hussein’s regime posed a grave threat. What, then, accounts for the international community’s firm support for the First Gulf War, but its almost unanimous protest of the Second Gulf War? Global public opinion. In 1991, when the United States still dominated the major organs of communications, and few people had ever even heard of the Internet, the international community had little choice but to presume the truthfulness of the United States’ statements. Twelve years later, the international community, empowered by access to, and the ability to disseminate, information on America’s past and present foreign policies, deconstructed the Bush administration’s rationales for invading Iraq. Global public opinion emboldened those leaders who consciously opposed the United States’ invasion, while it impugned the reputation of those leaders who publicly supported the war (Consider the fate of British Prime Minister, Tony Blair.).

Although global public opinion cannot prevent a superpower from implementing a particular policy, especially one that involves the deployment of force, it can make the consequences of taking such an action very unpleasant. In 1991, the international community underwrote nearly 90 percent of the United States’ wartime costs.¹⁰ Today, America’s economy sags under the weight of enormous nation-building costs: as it attempts to rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States has struggled to solicit continued international assistance. The war of 1991 did not greatly impair our credibility, but the war of 2003 may have done irreparable damage to it. The New York Times was unique among the mainstream media (and correct) in appraising “world public opinion” as one of “two superpowers on the planet.”¹¹ Regrettably, the United States has drawn so heavily upon the international community’s reservoir of goodwill to legitimate its engagement in Iraq that it now will find it difficult, if not impossible, to credibly counter other, more pressing threats, such as Iran’s and North Korea’s nascent nuclear weapons programs.

It is surprising that a force as important as global public opinion has elicited such little attention in mainstream media. To its credit, the 2004 Report of the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy accorded it prominent recognition:

Extraordinary changes in world communication have made international public opinion a key aspect to achieving American foreign policy objectives...The global communica-

tions revolution necessitates a cohesive strategy for America's international broadcasting, educational and cultural endeavors, and public affairs initiatives to directly support the nation's foreign policy.¹²

Although such admonitions abound in reports issued by think tanks and governmental organizations, the United States is still largely removed from the forums in which global public opinion is shaped. The Council on Foreign Relations issued a report in which it criticizes the State Department for insufficiently "engaging foreign societies and explaining to them America's positions and viewpoints."¹³ A recent report by the Aspen Institute concludes that

[The] discontinuity between conventional State Department modes of public communication and the public dialogues occurring on the Internet has serious implications for U.S. public diplomacy... Young people, entrepreneurs, ethnic communities, advocacy groups, terrorists, and cross-border enterprises are flocking to the Internet to gain access about news, politics, and markets. Yet the U.S. government is largely absent from this public square.¹⁴

While global public opinion is not a wholly cohesive force, its transnational and roughly autonomous character poses a formidable challenge to the United States. I am not predicting here the disappearance of the nation-state as a meaningful identity in global politics; to the contrary, it will remain the central pillar upon which the international order is structured well into the future. However, virtual opinion networks will almost assuredly grow in importance.¹⁵

Returning to earlier discussion, however, how does global public opinion bear on the utility of military power? In simple terms, it frowns upon those states that consolidate and employ unreasonable levels of military power, and, more importantly, rewards those individuals, organizations, or states that meaningfully contribute to the resolution of global issues through peaceful avenues. The United States, at present, faces a vexing dilemma. September 11, 2001 gave unprecedented urgency to the imperative of defeating terrorism, and, accordingly, to the need for heightened spending on national defense. However, power confers responsibility. Unfortunately, the international community is of the impression that the United States is neither capable of nor interested in providing such leadership, as it is solely preoccupied with prosecuting the "global war on terrorism."¹⁶ Without the support of the international community, America will have lost the most important element of its past success.

The International Community's Economic and Intellectual Rise

While the United States remains the economic juggernaut of the world in absolute terms, its relative economic supremacy is diminishing. The European Union is now the world's largest trading block partner, accounting for 18% of world imports and 19% of world exports as of 1998.¹⁷ Furthermore, China has now surpassed the United States as the leading recipient of foreign direct investment (FDI): in 2003, it received \$53 billion in FDI,

while the United States received only \$40 billion.¹⁸ Indeed, many believe that China may soon emerge as the world's dominant economic force. A July 2004 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* proclaimed that "China is getting ready to supplant the U.S. as the capitalist engine of the world."¹⁹ As the move towards economic regionalism accelerates, the United States' ability to pivot the world economy will likely attenuate. It is not only external ascendance, however, that challenges America's economic vitality; internal mismanagement, too, is a growing concern. Indeed, its growing "twin deficits" (budget and current account), if not duly redressed, will "cede to foreign governments increasing influence over the nation's fate," according to a recent report of the Council on Foreign Relations.²⁰

Perhaps even more worrisome, however, is the United States' receding dominance in science and technology. A recent study concludes that "Foreign advances in basic science now often rival or even exceed America's, apparently with little public awareness of the trend or its

implications for jobs, industry, national security or the vigor of the nation's intellectual and cultural life."²¹ The clearest competition emanates from India, China, and East Asian "tigers" such as Taiwan and Singapore, all of which have highly mobile economies and possess vast quantities of intellectual capital. Rarely discussed, but also of vital importance, is the legitimate challenge that European countries are beginning to pose. A study by the Carnegie Mellon Software Industry Center determined that for the first time in its history, the United States' ability to attract members of the "creative class" – comprising specialists in modern, knowledge-based industries – "seems to be imperiled."²² More specifically, Northern European countries such as Norway and Finland have emerged as some of the most dynamic participants in and forces behind the advancement of information technology.

While the United States, too, has a large pool of home-grown talent from which it can draw, there is no dispute that a disproportionate component of its intellectual reserve consists of foreign students. Of the country's scientists and engineers who have obtained a Ph.D., 38 percent of them are foreign-born.²³ It is not too much of an exaggeration to state that the United States maintains a perilous degree of dependency on outsiders. Indeed, as foreign talent continues to pour into this country, it appears that the drive to create a wellspring of home-grown talent has lost its urgency. In 1975, among developed countries, the United States ranked third in the proportion of college students majoring in science and engineering; today, it ranks 17th.²⁴

Convenient though it may be to dismiss these trends as fleeting, the recent proliferation of literature on this topic only affirms them with greater evidence and alarm than I do.²⁵

Looking into the Future

There are certainly other sources of waning American power that could and should be examined in any treatment such as the one that I attempt here (see footnote 1). Suffice it to say, however, that examining them reinforces the conclusions that I have derived above. In light of this analysis, I return to the question that I posed at the beginning of this paper: precisely what balance of power will emerge after the "era of the superpower" is no more? Some believe that in a power vacuum,

or, more precisely, in a world without a central power, bedlam will prevail. Historian Niall Ferguson subscribes to this point of view, arguing that “the alternative to a single superpower is not a multilateral utopia, but the anarchistic nightmare of a new Dark Age.”²⁶ Henry Kissinger issues a more temperate conclusion: the “[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.”²⁷

I argue that once the new international order prevails, the United States will find it difficult to reestablish its dominance, and that, furthermore, it is unlikely that any other state or coalition of states will ascend to the position of world superpower. Each potential competitor confronts internal crises that, if improperly resolved, will prevent it from accreting or wielding disproportionate levels of power:

- Russia, India, and China will all have to confront growing AIDS epidemics, which, if not adequately addressed and restrained, will have “significant economic, social, political, and military implications.”²⁸
- Russia is plagued by corruption and is struggling to make the transition from antiquated governance to modernized democracy.
- India’s population suffers from widespread rates of poverty and disease, both of which economic globalization will likely compound. Furthermore, its population is set to surpass China’s by as early as 2030, a development that will almost assuredly strain India’s economy and society.²⁹
- China will find it difficult to lead the free world if it continues to practice a combination of capitalist economics and communist governance, and even if it were to assume a leadership role, it would have to confront the growing economic gap between its rural and urban populations. Furthermore, China is aging more rapidly than any other country in history: a recent report concludes that it “will have to grapple with the same age-related fiscal, social and productivity challenges of countries with several times its per capita income.”³⁰
- The European Union is arguably the only band of nation-states that could plausibly assume the role of global superpower; it does, after all, exert formidable levels of economic and political leverage. However, without a standing army and hampered by internal divisions, it is doubtful that it will be capable of marshalling the strength and unity that such a position would require. Its recent failure to draft a constitution and create a new budget is ample testament to these divisions, which exhibit little sign of disappearing or even mitigating.

The above discussion does not offer a comprehensive appraisal of the complex and dynamic threats posed to each of the United States’ potential competitors; it does, however, challenge the view that some other country or band of countries is poised to ascend to the position of superpower. Furthermore, it implies that, given the right circumstances, several international orders could arise, each of which is deserving of critical examination. The list below, while certainly not exhaustive, does highlight some of the important possibilities:

- The United States attempts to reestablish its hegemony.

Apolarity prevails, with nonstate actors; virtual forces, such as global public opinion; and global issues (see above); all exerting disproportionate influence and largely dictating the actions of nation-states.

- The central powers of the world consolidate their respective spheres of influence without interfering in others’, but then attempt to project their influence across a wider arc.
- The central powers of the world leverage their shared resources and geographic dispersion towards the resolution of global issues.
- Supranational organizations such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund attempt to fill the power vacuum that waning American power creates.

It is likely that the new international order will consist of a mixture of the first three of these proposed scenarios. At this point, I will stop, because any further comments would likely strain the boundary between articulating reasonable predictions and specious prophecies. Indeed, one of the criticisms of attempting to formulate a model of the future of power is that the world does not conform to rational thought. Its vagaries are too numerous, too unpredictable, and too complex to be understood with any measure of certainty. Why then, do I invest any time or thought in creating such a framework? Simply, the only way in which we can begin to understand and address the world’s complexities is to simplify them, oftentimes grossly (Virtually the entire study of economics, for example, rests on fallacious, but nonetheless, illuminating, models. The Solow model of economic growth is a classic illustration.).

It is natural for scholars and policymakers to focus their attention on the present or immediate future, especially because the challenges that the world now faces demand continued vigilance, supreme creativity, and tremendous resolve; however, it would be unwise for them to all together neglect analysis of what the forthcoming decades and centuries entail.



Endnotes

1. A crucial linchpin whose analysis I forgo in this paper is the growing importance of global issues, chief among them climate change, the spread of infectious diseases, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the decentralization of global terrorist and criminal networks, and the growing socioeconomic disparities between and within underdeveloped countries. All of these problems, in addition to introducing considerable tumult and uncertainty into the international system, draw heavily on this country's resources, economic and otherwise.
2. For the classic examination of "soft power," see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).
3. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1989) 203.
4. Mary Kaldor, *Perspectives on Global Governance: Why the Security Framework Matters*, <<http://www.iddri.org/iddri/telecharge/G8/kaldor.pdf>> (April 2003) 3.
5. Lynn A. Karoly and Constantijn W. A. Panis, "The 21st Century at Work," RAND Corporation (2004) 12.
6. Based on "Facts & Figures," <<http://www.internetindicators.com/factfigure.html>>, and "Internet Usage Statistics – The Big Picture," <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>> (March 24, 2005).
7. See, for example, James A. Dewar, "The Information Age and the Printing Press: Looking Backward to See Ahead," RAND, <<http://www.rand.org/publications/P/PS014/>> (1998). For a more authoritative examination of this assertion, see Ronald J. Deibert, *Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia: Communication in World Order Transformation* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997).
8. Intuition would suggest that such programs, which proved so influential in effecting the Soviet Union's implosion, would figure more prominently in the United States' diplomatic arsenal, especially at a time when the international community receives its messages on critical issues with skepticism and, oftentimes, disdain. Regrettably, however, they are increasingly being neglected. See, for example, Sanford J. Ungar, "Pitch Imperfect," *Foreign Affairs* (May / June 2005) 2-13.
9. Susan B. Epstein, "U.S. Public Diplomacy: Background and the 9/11 Commission Recommendations," <<http://www.usembassy.it/pdf/other/RL32607.pdf>> (February 4, 2005).
10. "Statement by Sen. Murray on the \$87 Billion Supplemental for Iraq & Afghanistan," <<http://murray.senate.gov/news.cfm?id=213622>> (October 17, 2003).
11. Patrick Tyler, "Threats and Responses: News Analysis; A New Power in the Streets," *The New York Times* (February 17, 2003) A1.
12. United States, Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2004 Report of the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, <<http://www.state.gov/r/adcompd/rls/36275.htm#transmittal>> (September 28, 2004).
13. Jamie F. Metzl and Frank C. Carlucci, "State Department Reform," *The Council on Foreign Relations*, <http://www.cfr.org/pub3890/frank_c_carlucci_jamie_f_metzl/state_department_reform.php> (January 2001). Again, although much of my essay has centered on criticism of the Bush administration's range of domestic and foreign policies, I would be remiss to absolve the Clinton administration of any fault. It was, after all, his that imprudently dissolved the United States Information Agency in 1999.
14. David Bollier, "The Rise Of Netpolitik: How the Internet Is Changing International Politics and Diplomacy," *The Aspen Institute* <<http://www.aspeninstitute.org/atf/cf/%7BD5E6F227-659B-4EC8-8F84-8DF23CA704F5%7D/NETPOLITIK.PDF>> (2003).
15. "Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project," National Intelligence Council, <http://www.cia.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2020_es.html> (December 2004). This assessment posits that "Growing connectivity will be accompanied by the proliferation of virtual communities of interest, complicating the ability of states to govern. The Internet in particular will spur the creation of even more global movements, which may emerge as a robust force in international affairs."
16. Fareed Zakaria, "The One-Note Superpower," <<http://www.fareedzakaria.com/articles/newsweek/020204.html>> (February 2, 2004).
17. European Union, European Commission, "A Community of Fifteen: Key Figures" (September 1999) 36.
18. United States, The Department of State, "China Overtakes U.S. as Largest Investment Recipient, OECD Says," <<http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive/2004/Jun/29-603468.html>> (June 28, 2004).
19. Ted C. Fishman, "The Chinese Century," *The New York Times Magazine* (July 4, 2004) 24.
20. Menzie Chinn, "Getting Serious About the Twin Deficits," *Council on Foreign Relations* (September 10, 2005) 11.
21. William J. Broad, "U.S. Is Losing Its Dominance in the Sciences," *The New York Times* (May 3, 2004) A1.
22. Richard Florida and Irene Tinagli, "Europe in the Creative Age," *Carnegie Mellon Software Industry Center* (February 2004) 6.
23. Fareed Zakaria, "Rejecting the Next Bill Gates," *The Washington Post* (November 23, 2004) A29.
24. *Ibid.*
25. I explore the topic of America's declining preeminence in scientific and technological innovation in the September 2, 2005 issue of *The Tech*.
26. Niall Ferguson, "A World Without Power," *Foreign Policy* (July / August 2004) 32.
27. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994) 23-4.
28. National Intelligence Council, "The Next Wave of HIV/AIDS: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Russia, India, and China," <http://www.cia.gov/nic/special_nextwaveHIV.html> (September 2002).
29. Gargi Parsai, "India will overtake China's population by 2050," *The Hindu* (February 26, 2005).
30. Joseph Kahn, "China's Time Bomb: The Most Populous Nation Faces a Population Crisis," *The New York Times* (May 30, 2004) A1.