Through the Glass—Darker

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The texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly.

—Kenneth Waltz
Theory of International Politics

Abstract

In 2007 we argued against what many scholars incorrectly and dangerously assumed was the end of great power wars in the future. Their arguments centered on the power of technology, economics, democracy, or ethical norms to prevent war. However, none of these concepts make great power war unthinkable. While all of these arguments might remain appealing in theory, in practice they are at best optimistic and at their worst dangerous. Should the United States find itself in another great power conflict, capabilities taken for granted today—like air superiority or control of sea-lanes—might not exist tomorrow. The US must think seriously about how a great power conflict could occur, how it could be prevented, and how it would be fought and won. Technology, economics, democracy, and norms play a role in preventing great power war, but they do not make it unthinkable. Thus, great power war has a bright future, however tragic that might seem.

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In the fall of 2007, in its inaugural edition, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* published "Through the Glass Darkly: The Unlikely Demise of Great-Power War."[1] As the title suggests, the article focuses on the texture of international politics and the tragic, albeit recurring pattern of great power conflict. Essentially, it argues that the contemporary challenges posed by terrorists and insurgents were no match for the real danger that lay ahead: namely, the return of great power war. To be sure, the mood of the day assured everyone that great power war was dead; we were not convinced.

Looking back, some of the popular writing at the time in support of the demise of great power war appears quaint. In *The Pentagon's New Map*, a book widely read by insiders at the Pentagon and the general public, Thomas Barnett argues that "big wars are out, small wars are in." He went so far as to conclude that "state-on-state war has gone the way of the

dinosaur."[2] Similarly, Thomas Hammes in *The Sling and the Stone* makes the case that the "strategic concepts, operational execution, and tactical techniques of fourth-generation warfare require major changes in the way we think" about war and peace.[3] His view of war, which was closer in comparison to a giant versus a pygmy than a new way of war, incorrectly and dangerously assumed away the potential of great power wars in the future. Indeed, both authors believed that the United States would remain, for an indefinite period, hegemonic. No doubt, the United States is a powerful country, and with Canada to its north and Mexico to its south, it enjoys regional hegemony. This hegemony, however, is relative as recent events in Venezuela, other parts of Latin America, and the arctic attest. The uncomfortable fact is that the United States is not as powerful as some presumed, nor is the necessity of its leadership—once deemed "essential" to the world—a universal belief. China, Russia, and India are all appealing in their own way, and this poses challenges to US dominance—which is another way of saying that great power rivalry is back and, with it, competition and perhaps war.

In retrospect, when "Through the Glass Darkly" was published, the arguments used to consign great power war to the graveyard of history rested on a cosmology of interrelated and highly optimistic assumptions regarding the relationship among technology, economics, democracy, norms, and military affairs. It is important to stress that these ideas were not just academic musings. They took hold and formed the backbone of the United States' transformation efforts—a set of reforms that influenced policy decisions, which will affect the nation for years to come. These reforms helped launch what one analyst called a "radical restructuring of US defense policy that is neither necessary nor desirable."[4] In December 2004, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated, "You have to go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you might want."[5] As the 2007 article observed, "The necessity or desire to transform America's military ultimately rests with policy makers, but it is high time that scholars question what can only be described as a wellspring of belief that the era of great-power war has ended, lest we find ourselves going to war with a military that we do not want."[6]

It is in that spirit that we return to the original article and assess the veracity of its claims. Like its predecessor, this examination is divided into five sections. The first considers the events of September 11 and the effects they did and did not have on international politics. The second looks at the relationship between technology and deterrence. The third section focuses on the supposed pacifying effect of economics on state behavior, while the

fourth does the same for democracy. Finally, the article considers the trendy notion that great power war is going the way of slavery—that is, war is becoming normatively prohibited. At the outset we should be clear—the question is not whether technology, economics, democracy, or ethical norms put a brake on war. In some cases they do. Rather the issue is, Does any one of these make great power war unthinkable? While all of these arguments might remain appealing in theory, in practice they are at best optimistic and at their worst dangerous.

September 11 and International Politics

The post-9/11 years were largely defined by the claim "We're living in a whole new world."[7] When speaking at McChord AFB in 2003, Vice President Dick Cheney acknowledged, "9/11 changed everything for us. 9/11 forced us to think in new ways about threats to the United States."[8] In 2005, historian John Lewis Gaddis argued that the "surprise attack shattered American assumptions about national security and reshaped American grand strategy."[9] Yet, just years removed from the terrorist attacks, others began calling for more realistic assessments of 9/11's impact on international politics. The assumption that the attacks signaled a "great change in the architecture of world politics," they asserted, was "largely a delusion."[10] As Robert Kagan wrote in 2008, those who regarded 9/11 and its aftermath as a harbinger of US decline failed to recognize that the US had weathered far more "disastrous" threats to its position, even at the heights of its post-WWII power. China's fall to communism, the Korean War, Soviet nuclear tests, and nationalist turbulence in Indochina, said Kagan, came much closer to upsetting US relative power than the 9/11 attacks or their fallout.[11]

Thus, the original article's claims about the effects of the September 11th terrorist attacks were not only well supported at the time of its publication, but continue to hold merit today. The terrorist attacks "killed thousands," "shocked . . . the world," and "altered many of the aspects of the way [states] do business."[12] Yet they did nothing to fundamentally alter the nature of international politics: anarchy remained the defining condition, states remained the primary actors, and states' impulses to ensure survival under anarchy—by balancing or building against other powerful states—guaranteed that the risk of great power war remained an ever-present reality. Claims that a "whole new world" of international politics had materialized were quickly upset by the reemergence of great power politics. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the return of great power competition is already upon us; the 2018 National Defense Strategy clearly specifies that "inter-

state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."[13] And it seems plausible that the resumption of interstate strategic competition may have actually been hastened and magnified by the US responses to the 9/11 attacks.

In retrospect, post-9/11 foreign policies failed to account for the realities of ever-present interstate competition; if anything, they expedited the resumption of great power rivalry. Even in the early days of the coalition war in Afghanistan, strategists questioned the possible fallout from military interventionism. As the Bush administration's ambitions expanded to include a "global" war on terror, the turn away from restraint and toward primacy prompted noted strategy experts to urge caution. Fifteen years after the attacks, their once subdued calls for moderation had crystallized into open criticism of the United States' maximalist foreign policies. Crime and terrorism, said John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, were certainly vexing problems. But they were "hardly existential threats"; as such, they did not warrant the type of reactions comprising the global war on terrorism (GWOT).[14]

Generally, the displays of American power raised wide-ranging concerns—particularly among potential competitors—about US intentions for employing its extraordinary capabilities.[15] They also provided potential competitors like China and Russia with a crucial advantage: the GWOT "distracted the United States' strategic focus away from them" and offered an inadvertent strategic edge.[16] America's long-term distraction with violent extremist organizations arguably stretched its capabilities to the point that the US sacrificed preparation for the challenges of looming great power conflict. Faced with a rising China and a revanchist Russia, the United States and its Western allies now have to overcome the effects—namely, "strategic atrophy"—of their post-9/11 preoccupation with "the wrong kind of warfare."[17]

The US now finds itself at a disadvantage with respect to China's ascendance, and this could be problematic. China's efforts to shape its sphere of influence drew little attention during early post-9/11 US adventurism. Yet China has since lost the ability to "disguise its rise."[18] Its ambitions for shaping its sphere of influence—and more specifically, for limiting US ability to project power in the Indo-Pacific region—are abundantly evident. Xi Jinping seems far less concerned with keeping a low profile and avoiding entanglement in international conflicts than with advancing China's assertiveness on the world stage (notably, in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative). China's ambition risks instilling fear in the United States, creating the possibility that it will react fearfully rather than

rationally. This climate increases the likelihood of a great power war.[19] While the logic might be unduly alarmist, it nonetheless raises the possibility that US "catch-up" responses to the "sudden" rise of China are apt to be viewed as threatening.

Technology Will Not Deter Great Power War

As the article argued in 2007, "technological shifts have continuously altered the methods of war," but in the end, "political arrangements matter, and the deterrent effect of any weapon should be evaluated within the context of the structure of the international system."[20] This claim is as true now as it was then. Indeed, one might conclude that structure matters even more now than it did 10 years ago, given the shift to multipolarity.[21] Under "lopsided" multipolarity—where the United States outweighs both China and Russia militarily—it will maintain power advantages on some fronts, but at smaller margins than it did during the unipolar moment when it reigned supreme. Power diffusion, and related great power competition concerns, will be governed by the continued growth of Asian economic and military clout predominantly from China and India and the relative decline of Western economic influence.[22] As China continues to translate economic gains into military modernization, the US will "focus mainly on countering China."[23] Avoiding the perils of security competition will require that the US be more cautious about exercising its power abroad.[24]

Yet exercising diplomacy and restraint could prove to be challenging. Even scholars who adopt a more circumspect view of emerging multipolarity, and the implications of growing military-technological parity, acknowledge its underlying risks. Barry Posen, who questions the assumption that multipolarity is inherently unstable, nonetheless acknowledges that growing parity will only "mute" great power competition. The diffusion of power will not eradicate "great power adventures."[25] China's rise is apt to entail alliance reconfigurations and temptations to employ conventional military power.[26] In fact, just as the original article predicted, the United States and India, Russia and China, and France and Germany have taken steps toward tightening their security relationships. China's progress toward narrowing its power gap with the US has already met with a return to US defense budget growth and the establishment of new US defense cooperation commitments—notably with India. In parallel, China and Russia have grown closer, with Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin meeting three times in 2018 and China sending a "strong supporting contingent" to Russia's Vostok-2018 military exercises.[27]

Given the complexities and uncertainties of multipolarity, the US arsenal of advanced conventional weapons (and those of other great powers) may not only prove ill suited to deterring great power war but also provide occasion for its inadvertent onset. The stealth, speed, and lethality of advanced conventional technologies—allowing for quick and decisive US victories in the Persian Gulf (1991), Kosovo (1999), and Afghanistan (2001)—have proven increasingly enticing to other great powers. Russia and China drew similar lessons from these conflicts, each embarking on military modernization programs geared toward antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) and grey zone strategies.[28] Advanced conventional weapons already undergird Russia's and China's respective salami-slicing campaigns in Eastern Europe and the South China Sea. Russia began modernizing its military following its 2008 war with Georgia, enhancing its ground force readiness and updating its integrated air defense system. The improvements have allowed for significant defensive and force-projection gains (against border states).[29] Though Russia has since dialed back modernization efforts in the wake of its economic downturn, China continues to seek avenues for undermining the United States' conventional weapons edge. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) still trails the United States in the areas of innovation and operational proficiency. Its modernization achievements, though—especially the development of intermediate-range missiles that threaten US forward bases and carrier strike groups—have substantially augmented China's "advantage of proximity in most plausible conflict scenarios."[30]

As great power rivals continue to chip away at the United States' once considerable smart-weapons advantage, national security experts are reevaluating the viability of deterrence. On this front, the diffusion of capabilities, as well as the expansion of competition to the space and cyber domains, do more than complicate appraisals of the balance of power; they threaten to upend the foundations of deterrence.[31] The arrival of dual-capable hypersonic weapons (and delivery systems)—currently being designed and tested by the US, China, and Russia—will arguably risk jeopardizing strategic stability. Their ultrahigh velocity could reduce warning time to the extent that "a response would be required on first signal of attack"; likewise, their deployment in ready-to-launch mode could trigger preemptive strikes, as others might perceive it as a sign of impending attack.[32] Further, cyber weapons' potential for disabling an opponent's "early warning and command systems" may diminish the expected costs of first strike under crisis conditions.[33] Autonomous weapons also have the potential to fundamentally alter the psychological underpinnings of strategy.

And, as Kenneth Payne notes, there is no "a priori reason" to expect that substituting artificial intelligence (AI) for human intelligence—that rapid, accurate, and unbiased information processing and responses—"will necessarily be safer." Because AI limits the risks of using force, it could make conflict more acceptable to risk-averse states; because its speed and precision favor the offense, it could prove more conducive to aggression than deterrence; and because it shapes a host of processes and technologies rather than a single weapon or system, its effects on strategy (and the challenges of its regulation) could prove counter to deterrence.[34]

As noted in the original article, nuclear weapons helped sustain the "cold peace" during the Cold War—not because of their awesome destructive power but because that awesome destructive power helped buttress bipolarity.[35] The simplicity of bipolarity and superpower balancing, in turn, limited "the dangers of miscalculation and overreaction."[36] Multipolarity, though, makes for complexity; additional great power players provide additional opportunities for miscalculation and overreaction. Given these conditions and the perceived "usability" of advanced conventional weapons relative to nuclear weapons, it seems likely that they will fall short of yielding "the kinds of political structures necessary to enhance deterrence."[37] To counter Posen, the diffusion of advanced conventional technology may well have cheapened the near-term costs and risks of going to war, and particularly engaging in hybrid warfare. Even if the US manages to avoid a direct confrontation with Russia or China, it seems increasingly plausible that it could be dragged into a conflict involving one or more of their allies.

Globalization Will Not Bring Eternal Peace

One of our central claims in 2007 concerned globalization and peace. As the article put it, "Economic interdependence does bring nations close together, but interdependence does not seem to be capable of altering the basic nature of international relations, which deals in the currency of politics, not economics. . . . International peace, which is underwritten by the great powers, produces interdependence—not the other way around."[38] And indeed, in keeping with the projections of the 2007 article, the "third wave" of globalization, and its disruptive intersection with emerging multipolarity, did little to quell the return to great power competition.[39] Rather, it helped destabilize relations between the great powers, just as the "second wave" did in advance of the First World War. Three items merit attention: the limitations of globalists' claims about the pacifying effects of economic interdependence; the parallels between historical and contemporary waves

of globalization, which confirm that interdependence ultimately yields fear and insecurity; and the implications of present-day globalization backlash.

With respect to the first point, the original version of this article appropriately lamented the noted globalist claim that "trade promotes peace," citing the works of Norman Angell and Thomas Friedman. Though Angell's *The Great Illusion* focuses on the pre-WWI Europe and Friedman's *The World Is Flat* on the post–Cold War peace, they share a similar position: that economic interdependence, and the gains derived from it, should have a preventive effect on conflict. It is worth noting that neither Angell nor Friedman predicted that globalization would bring an end to war. Both were more circumspect. Angell claimed that globalization should deter war, save world leaders' "great illusion" that taking up arms could improve a state's standing.[40] Friedman, in turn, openly acknowledged that he held "no illusions" that "[commercial peace theory] or anything else will stop China from invading Taiwan if Taiwan declares independence tomorrow."[41] In other words, even the noted globalists of the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries recognized the limits of globalization's power to transform the course of great power politics.

Second, parallels between the globalization-competition correlations of the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries bolster the long-held realist position that interdependence ultimately yields insecurity.[42] While Angell and Friedman acknowledge the limitations of globalization, their shared argument—that economic and technological interdependence curb opportunities for conflict—ignores crucial historical realities.[43] As historian Margaret MacMillan aptly notes, "What Angell and others failed to see was the downside of globalization."[44] Globalization is marked by the increasingly efficient distribution of people, goods, services, and capital. While efficiency creates gains for some, it generates losses for others.[45] As gains and losses are reflected in changes to the balance of power, tensions arise; declining states become fearful of rising states' intentions and vice versa. Declining states seek to preserve the existing balance of power, and rising powers seek to augment it. Their internal and external balancing behaviors of building arms and building alliances increase the risk of an attendant spiral to war. Simply put, globalization destabilizes, particularly when it advances the transition to multipolarity. The wave of globalization preceding WWI, for example, met with German gains on British economic power.[46] In spite of the fact that they were each other's chief trading partners, Britain had become increasingly concerned by Germany's economic ascendance. By the mid-1890s, it had begun to perceive Germany as a competitor for markets and colonies. When Germany

initiated its naval buildup in 1898 to enhance its ability to compete with the UK, Britain responded in kind, kicking off a naval arms race. The consequent security spiral helped pave the way to war.[47] The same pattern is exhibited in Germany's apprehensions of Russia's trading and industrial advances. Most German leaders were dismissive of Russia's military power; they worried, though, that its economic development and its rearmament program could pose future challenges. This fear, in turn, helped accelerate Germany's "rush" to war.[48]

It should come as little surprise that the present wave of globalization—which met with relative gains for China and relative losses for the United States—has contributed to heightened suspicion, tension, and fear between the two powers. The United States' present-day competition with China shares some key similarities with Britain's prewar competition with Germany. Just as Germany lagged behind other European powers prior to the onset of the industrial age, China lagged behind other great power states prior to the onset of the information age. And just as Germany became a leading industrial state within half a century, so too did China. China's integration into the global market, beginning with Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms of the late 1970s, coincided with the onset of the digital revolution. Over the next four decades, China achieved the "fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history."[49] In 1978, it accounted for less than one percent of world trade; by 2013, it had surpassed the US as the world's largest trader of goods.[50] Much like Britain began to view Germany with suspicion near the beginning of the twentieth century, the US has become far more wary of China than it was in the 1990s. Despite the fact that the US and China are each other's largest trading partners, the growth in trade between the two has done little to subdue mutual reservations.[51] If anything, it may yield an even "scarier" form of globalization backlash than that which preceded the First World War: the UK sought to preserve most of its commercial ties in the early twentieth century while the US appears to be curtailing them.[52] Emile Simpson highlights the stark contrast between American leaders' perspectives on China at the turn of the century and the present day. In the early 2000s, he notes, they praised its participation in the globalist moment; by 2017, the US National Security Strategy decried China's challenges to "American power, influence, and interests" and its efforts to "erode American security and prosperity."[53]

Finally, US forays into countering globalization's unforeseen effects are apt to generate security risks similar to those Britain assumed before WWI. US efforts to shore up waning hegemony by (re)building and exer-

cising its vast power-projection capabilities, reminiscent of Britain's imperial overextension of the early 1900s, could ultimately undermine stability.[54] The United States is still coming to grips with the need to curb China's aims in the Pacific. While the US Navy is "shrunken and overworked," the PLA navy is now the largest (in raw numbers of warships and submarines, though not in tonnage) and fastest growing in the world.[55] Xi Jinping identifies the PLA's naval buildup and modernization as crucial to China's strength, prompting some to draw parallels between Xi and Kaiser Wilhelm.[56] Though China's fleet is far less advanced, it has nonetheless allowed for the expansion of Chinese dominance in the South China, East China, and Yellow Seas. Indeed, the Pentagon's attempt to compensate for two decades of underinvestment during China's military modernization and A2/AD advancements may herald the next phase of a spiral toward conflict. The Pentagon has reportedly assembled war plans to account for a possible confrontation with China. It is also expanding and refurbishing the US fleet and fast-tracking weapons development and acquisition efforts (most notably, for longer-range missiles).[57] Meanwhile, US partners and allies are prodding the United States to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific region, offset Iran's ambitions in the Middle East, and deter Russian incursions into the Baltics . . . at the same time the US is trying to back away from its role as the global policeman.[58] In other words, the need for US architectural planning—particularly with respect to China—may be disrupted by calls for firefighting. The push to fight fires rather than craft and execute measured plans is problematic; it not only derails the US ability to best prepare for great power competition but also generates the additional risk of stumbling blindly into great power war.

Democracies Will Not Guarantee Tranquility

The positive relationship between democracy and peace held considerable sway in 2007. Although not popular at the time, the article argued that "relations between democratic states are not by default peaceful because democracies are states, and all states, presumably, have interests, not the least of which is survival. . . . When interests compete, as they tend to do, conflict arises—regardless of the form of government."[59] No doubt, the peaceful end of the Cold War sparked new interest in the ostensible "universalization" of liberal democracy as well as its implications for great power state behavior.[60] Scholars drew attention to the apparent correlation between the presence of democracy between states and the absence of war.[61] Influenced by democratic peace scholarship, and the seeming affirmation of the United States' Cold War democratization efforts, policy

makers called for increased efforts toward democracy promotion abroad. Greater numbers of democratic states, they reasoned, would make for greater stability in the international system. Twenty years removed from the "liberal democratic moment," it seems as clear as ever that states' domestic politics have little influence on their international behaviors. Persistent questions about the causal links between democracy and peace, coupled with fallout from the US democratization efforts of the 1990s and the early GWOT period, have chipped away at the prevalence of democratic peace studies and policies.

Democratic peace scholars traditionally attribute the absence of war between democracies to two key factors: normative preferences for nonviolent dispute resolution and institutional incentives for foreign policy caution (as risky wars may cost elected leaders their seats). Both claims are widely contested. Democracies are no less war-prone, overall, than autocracies. Indeed, democracies quite commonly violate liberal-humanitarian norms during the initiation and execution of wars.[62] Authoritarian leaders also face domestic constraints on their decisions to go to war; their decisions to use force are typically far less rash than democratic peace theorists allow.[63] Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, for example, was arguably based on a reasoned assessment of Iraqi vulnerabilities following the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88. His decision to go to war likely had more to do with the balance of power in the Middle East than his institutionally unchecked recklessness.[64] Finally, the "empirical law" that democracies do not go to war with other democracies may be far less concrete than previously acknowledged. As noted in 2007, "a case can be made that the War of 1812, the American Civil War, the Boer War, the Spanish-American War, and even World War II saw democracies fighting against other democracies."[65] Further, recent research indicates that "the risk of conflict between democracies has increased as the world has become more democratic."[66]

Academic debates aside, the ramifications of US democratization efforts of the 1990s and early 2000s require serious deliberation. The Clinton and Bush administrations maintained broad faith in the power of democratic ideals and institutions; both upheld democracy promotion as a linchpin of US grand strategy. In the name of shoring up democracy abroad, Clinton expanded foreign assistance to newly independent states in Eastern Europe. Bush, in turn, justified the 2003 invasion of Iraq (in part) as a critical step toward securing democracy in the Middle East.[67] Despite their centrality to US grand strategy, these democratization endeavors yielded unforeseen fallout—chiefly, growing resistance to US interventionism. Russia viewed US assistance to Eastern Europe as a threat

to its own sphere of influence. In 2008, it launched a war to back separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia; in 2014, it advanced into Ukraine and annexed the Crimean Peninsula. China, in turn, was initially opposed to the US war in Iraq. It has since exploited instability in the Middle East to its own advantage, forging ties through its Belt and Road Initiative and bolstering its regional presence and access to energy resources.[68] Despite the costly lessons gleaned from its efforts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the United States remains, in Stephen Walt's words, famously "bad at promoting democracy" abroad.[69]

Essentially, both democratic peace scholarship and democracy promotion policies are dismissive of "the essence" of great power politics: interests, rather than ideals or institutions, drive state behavior.[70] Regardless of its ordering effect on a state's internal politics, democracy holds no such effect on international politics. Great power states ensure their survival by protecting and pursuing vital interests (by maintaining or building power). That states act on their interests is a constant of international politics; that states may choose to act on their democratic ideals or institutions is a convenience of their position in the international system. Given the realities of emerging multipolarity, the US would do well to curtail ambitions unrelated to power maintenance. As Parag Khanna warns, democratic peace theory and its related policy offshoots may be "inspirational and aspirational," but they offer few practical applications in the contemporary security environment.[71]

Norms Are Not Enough

Lastly, neither democratic norms nor norms broadly writ have a discernible effect on the incidence of great power war. An honest assessment of the historical record reveals that few great power states behave in accordance with the purported standards of good behavior in the international system (unless their relative power allows or calls for it). In response to the carnage of the First World War, great power leaders sought options for guarding against a return to conflict, enshrining norms against aggressive war in the Covenant of the League of Nations and the Kellogg-Briand Pact. The covenant called for steps toward disarmament (the reduction and regulation of armaments) and protections for self-determination, while Kellogg-Briand codified a narrow range of acceptable bases for going to war. Absent a hegemonic rules enforcer, or two powerful blocs balancing "around" the rules, expansionist provocations from Germany, Japan, and Italy went largely unchecked. The tensions and competition inherent

in multipolarity overcame normative impulses against war, paving the way to the Second World War.

Even beyond the realm of war, norms have little influence on great power state behavior. If anything, great powers traditionally exploit norms-based rhetoric to justify their efforts to maintain or maximize power. The British and French defended their colonial exploits as efforts to "modernize" and "civilize" non-European peoples; Americans rationalized their Cold War interventions as attempts to "democratize" developing states.[72] Even at the height of its post–Cold War power, the United States rarely acted against violations of international norms when its interests were not at stake. It intervened in Haiti in 1994 under the guise of "restoring democracy" to the country. Yet policy makers were likely just as concerned with staving off an influx of Haitian refugees as they were with the integrity of Haiti's political system. The United States did not intervene in Rwanda in 1994. Despite overwhelming evidence that genocide was underway, the US was ill prepared to act in a part of the world where it maintained few vital national interests. When it became clear that the American unipolar moment was waning, US leaders shied away from acting on norms even when US interests were (arguably) at stake. The United States took no action in response to Russia's 2008 incursions in Georgia or its 2014 annexation of Crimea, as it hoped to avoid triggering conflict with another nuclear-armed state.[73]

The realist tradition embraces this amoral view of international politics; it calls on us to "see the world as it is, not as we would like it to be."[74] To do otherwise—to act based on abstract values rather than historical truths—risks sacrificing the plausible attainment of security for the implausible attainment of the "absolute good."[75] Though critics of this perspective claim that it is unduly bleak, noting that states routinely act in accordance with international norms, realists turn to historical precedent. Thus, structural realists warn US national security leaders against forays into normatively inspired adventurism. Efforts to remake the word in accordance with international principles or American values, they note, will do little to stave off threats to vital interests. In fact, they may actually trigger such threats.

Liberal internationalist and neoconservative policy agendas, says Mearsheimer, are far more likely to yield conflict than observance of strategic restraint.[76] In other words, if the US hopes to avoid stumbling into great power war, it would do well to align its behavior with rational assessments of the balance of power rather than with the tenets of international good behavior. Walt and Mearsheimer assert that a rational evaluation of the current distribution of power calls for offshore balancing: encouraging

other states to assume greater responsibility for checking rising powers and exercising US might only when necessary. The strategy does not call for a complete disavowal of an international role for the United States but for focusing action on cases in which American ends are clear and achievable.[77] Such an approach would arguably help to preserve US strength; it would require that leaders prioritize national interests and political realities over moral aspirations. As Walt reminds us, "International politics is a contact sport, and even powerful states must compromise their political principles for the sake of security and prosperity."[78]

Conclusions

Contrary to the spirit of 2007, we are not living in a whole new world. The events of September 11 and the wars that have followed have had a pronounced effect on US foreign and defense policy, but they have not done away with the state system. The world is still made up of states—large and small—that must look out for themselves. To pretend otherwise is to neglect history or to fall prey to presentism—something common among pundits but dangerous for statesmen and members of the armed forces. That being the case, it is worth remembering that the most serious threats to the great powers have historically stemmed from other great powers. In the years ahead, as strong challengers emerge, conflicts will arise—making war among the great powers more, not less, likely.

The implications of great power war are easier to grasp than to implement. The US must think seriously about what a great power war would look like, how it could occur and be prevented, and how it would be fought so it can gain some understanding about the equipment and forces needed to fight and win. Thinking about future war does not mean the United States should ignore current threats or overlook the need to relieve misery and suffering around the world. As citizens, we should be concerned with the political and human consequences of poverty, ecological degradation, and population growth. We must also fully address the problem of terrorism. But as real as the consequences of poverty, ecological degradation, population growth, and terrorism might be, it is hard to come up with a realistic scenario involving these tragedies that would alter the balance of power.[79] Put simply, we cannot neglect the basics. Should the United States find itself in another great power war, capabilities taken for granted today—like air superiority or control of sea-lanes—might not exist tomorrow. That technology, economics, democracy, and norms play a role in preventing great power war is not the issue. The issue is whether they

make it unthinkable. Regrettably, they do not. Thus, great power war has a bright future, however tragic that might seem. SSQ

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Notes

1. Author's note: Col Thomas E. Griffith, Jr., USAF, is the co-author of the original article.

2. Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2004), 271, passim. Barnett's theory and policy prescriptions are based on the idea that state warfare is extinct.

3. Col Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004), 5, passim.

4. Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

5. Eric Schmitt, "Iraq-Bound Troops Confront Rumsfeld over Lack of Armor," *New York Times*, 8 December 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/.

6. James Wood Forsyth Jr. and Thomas E. Griffith Jr., "Through the Glass Darkly: The Unlikely Demise of Great-Power War," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 98–99, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-01_Issue-1/Forsyth.pdf.

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17. Mattis addresses the subject of "strategic atrophy" in the introduction to the *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 1. Jyri Raitasalo suggests that the US preoccupation with the "wrong kind of warfare" has worked to its detriment. See Raitasalo, "Big War Is Back," *The National Interest*, 8 September 2018, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/big-war-back-30802.

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21. In 1991, China's GDP totaled $383 billion and the United States' totaled $6.174 trillion; since the end of the Cold War, China's GDP has jumped to $12.24 trillion and the United States' to $19.39 trillion (2017 figures). While the US annual GDP growth over the 27-year period averaged 2.44 percent, China's averaged 9.75 percent. China's military spending, as a percent of GDP, remained relatively steady across the period, hovering around the 2 percent mark (averaging 1.95 percent across the period); US military spending fluctuated in conjunction with the end of the Cold War and the onset of the GWOT (averaging 3.74 percent across the period). China and the United States are set to spend $178 and $622 billion, respectively, on defense in 2019; they are projected to spend at roughly equal levels, $1.270 trillion and $1.335 trillion, by 2045 (numbers adjusted for purchasing power parity [PPP]). For historical GDP and defense spending data, see World Bank DataBank country indicators, including those available at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?view=chart, and https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?view=chart. For projected defense spending data, see Ministry of Defence, *Global Strategic Trends—Out to 2045*, 5th ed. (United Kingdom: Ministry of Defence, Strategic Trends Programme, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2014), https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/MinofDef_Global%20Strategic%20Trends%20-%202045.pdf.

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26. Posen, 350. Also see Walt, "What Sort of World?" Walt contends, "In practice, this will mean maintaining, deepening, and if possible expanding America's alliance ties there, even as China tries to push the U.S. out and bring its neighbors into its own loose sphere of influence. Maintaining the U.S.'s position in Asia will not be easy[;] because the distances are vast, America's Asian allies want to preserve their current economic ties with China, and some of those allies don't like each other very much. Holding this coalition together will require deft U.S. diplomacy . . . in short supply of late, and success is by no means certain."

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