Resizing and Restructuring States: New World Sovereignty in a New World

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When it comes to the future of sovereignty, the main paradigms seem to be stuck in the same place at different times. Liberals have looked to Europe's future, hoping that the European Union (EU) would become a large, consolidated federal union—only to see that future never arrive.[1] Realists, on the other hand, have looked to Europe's past of hungry great powers and unitary states. These templates worked tolerably during the Cold War, but have since fallen from favor. Bismarck would hardly

[1] See, for example, Ernst Haas, *Beyond the Nation-State: Functionalism and International Organization* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1964); Ernst Haas, "The Study of Regional Integration: Reflections on the Joy and Anguish of Pretheorizing," *International Organization*, vol. 24, no. 4 (Autumn 1970), pp. 607–646; Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* (New York: Tarcher, 2005); Andrew Moravcsik, "Why Europe is Stronger than Ever," *Newsweek*, 31 July 2009. Available at: http://www.newsweek.com/moravcsikwhy-europe-stronger-ever-81569.

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recognize this world: countries are getting smaller and less coherent, conquest fails to pay, and interstate wars dwindle. These trends persuaded Kenneth Waltz to declare the death of international politics as he knew it.[2] If Europe's experience is of diminishing global relevance, what might be better?

I argue that the Americas offer a helpful laboratory for thinking about new forms of sovereignty. All parallels are imperfect, but the early Americas in particular provide unusually good experiments about how small numbers of people with force projection problems cobbled together cohesive polities across a range of geographic, economic, military, and ideological circumstances. Power is likely to continue to devolve, and the Americas offer a wealth of institutional forms with fragmented authority.

To make the case, the first section lays out the paper's scope and empirical puzzle in the form of a brief history of political integration. The second section elaborates the logic of my argument and the third examines alternate views. The fourth section discusses what new world sovereignty may have to say to current events, and the final section sums the analysis and ventures recommendations.

Scope and Puzzles: The Political Integration Pendulum

Over the long haul, the number and composition of states has done nothing but change, and this paper seeks to explain and predict changes in the political centralization and territorial extent of the median state. The two outcomes are linked: highly centralized states need not be as big to be as powerful as less centralized, more extensive states. But the core concept is the amount of power at the disposal of a political unit, and that is a result of size and structure. Surely there are other interesting facets of sovereignty, but space is limited.

[2] At the time of his death, Waltz was working on an article detailing how he was fortunate to live to see the birth and death of international relations theory. Fortunately, others have picked up the torch. See Mariya Grinberg, "*The Death of International Politics?*" (Unpublished Manuscript: MIT, 2022).

Let us begin with size. Starting in 1500, when the world starts to form an interconnected system, the number of states in the world gradually came down (as their size went up) until around 1900.[3] This was largely a product of European conquest. The exact innovations that allowed Europeans to dominate the globe for a few centuries remain a heated subject, but the upshot is that some states acquired the resources, industries, technologies, and strategies to expand.

But as is wont to happen in a competitive system, advantages dissipated and trends reversed. Coinciding roughly with what Stephen Biddle calls "the modern system," great power armies found it increasingly laborious to take and hold territory.[4] Nuclear weapons, globalization, and nationalism reinforced this geopolitical dynamic and the number of states crept upward. The United Nations began with 51 member states, by 1961 that number was up to 104, by 1991 the figure was 166, and today stands at 193.

If international relations happen in the brooding shadow of violence, then the sun is near its meridian. Over the last several decades, the frequency of military stalemates has increased drastically, and even decisive victories have not yielded political windfalls.[5] Here's a correlation that would make Clausewitz blush: the United States pumps record sums into the military as its foreign policy returns deflate—even against the weakest states. And the United States is not alone; China, Russia, Britain, France, Israel, Japan, and Germany have not seen aggression pay

[3] These dates and numbers are approximate since definitional issues are controversial and data limitations are significant until quite recently.

[4] Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006). Technology and tactics undermined some of what Halford Mackinder described in his long-term discussion of "the Colombian epoch" in his article "The Geographic Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal* 23, 1904, pp. 421–444. See also Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of the United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 477; and Martin van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 B.C. to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp. 283, 296.

[5] See Virginia Page Fortna, "Where Have All the Victories Gone? Peacekeeping and War Outcomes", paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, Toronto, Canada, 2009, pp. 2–7. For skeptical views, see Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Paul K. MacDonald, "Is Imperial Rule Obsolete? Assessing the Barriers to Overseas Adventurism", *Security Studies,* vol. 18, no.1 (February 2009), pp. 79–114.

in decades. Every era sees the acquisition and dissolution of empires, but the present era has seen a series of imperial collapses, which were not replaced by ersatz empires. In the words of J. H. Elliott, "Empire calls forth empire,"[6] but then the deaths of empire may call forth the deaths of other empires. Like spouses and perhaps for similar reasons, empires often die soon after each other.[7]

As others have argued, the calculus of conflict is changing.[8] It may help to sketch three planks for why this is so: military, economic, and normative. Militarily, technologies and tactics have become increasingly effective at killing people and breaking things but increasingly ineffective at commanding obedience. Nuclear weapons are the crest of this wave, able to slaughter staggering numbers with stunning speed. Yet even when monopolized by one power, the political gains to be reaped with atomic arms hardly match their destructive capability. How to win a nuclear war became a riddle that could rarely be solved outside of remote scenarios. But to stress nuclear weapons is to miss the rest of the wave; conventional deterrence flows in the same direction. Newly conquered land used to boost relative power; now they are mostly millstones. The net result is security independence and deadlock. Severe threats are deterred by the risk of total war, and limited aims conflicts do not threaten to reorder the great power rankings.

Economically, wealth has become decreasingly territorially based as the service sector grew in advanced states. When the world was primarily

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[6] See Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 23. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper also declare that, "The trajectory of European empire is best understood… in relationships and competitions among empires." See their *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 446.

[7] See Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Nader Elhefnawy, "The Societal Complexity and Diminishing Returns in Security," *International Security*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004), pp. 152–174; cp. Richard Little, Stuart Kaufman, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[8] See Carl Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete? A Review Essay", *International Security,* vol. 14, no. 4 (Spring 1990), pp. 42–64; John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Stephen Van Evera, *The Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 105–116; and Robert Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Leading Power Peace", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 96, no. 1 (March 2002), pp. 1–14.

agricultural, extracting resources was fairly easy. With the shift to manufacturing and heavy industry, that became less straightforward. But the major transition was to service and knowledge economies, which flourished under the rule of law. Economic greatness could no longer be assured by simply aggregating assets.[9] Great powers that tried to coerce their way to the top became spectacular failures; states with a lighter touch fared better.[10] The bottom line is that the net costs of conquest have bounded upwards, draining the color from imperial temptations.

Normatively, ideas that bolstered state strength and conquest were turned against their initiators. Nationalism is a textbook case of this sorcerer's apprentice problem, and is the central norm inhibiting conquest. As groups embraced the notion that a people ought to rule itself, resistance to foreign domination grew stiffer. Most likely normative factors are the least important leg of my argument. Nationalism has been around in its modern form since at least 1789, and people have always been willing to die for groups. Changes in military and economic changes have largely set the context in which nationalist ideas resonate, though ideas have made significant contributions on their own.[11]

Let us turn to structure. Since 1500, there has been great variety in state forms around the world, but with broad brushstrokes the trend

[9] See also Geir Lundestad, "Why does Globalization Encourage Fragmentation?" *International Politics* 41, 2004, pp. 265–276, and Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), chaps. 9–10.

[10] The demise of the USSR can be seen as both cause and effect in my argument. The demise of a hyper-militarized state was the single most important proximate cause behind the enervation of international cooperation in the period following. But in a deeper sense, the failure of the USSR was an indicator of how maladaptive highly coercive institutions are in current conditions.

[11] See Daniel Deudney, "Geopolitics as Theory: Historical Security Materialism," *European Journal of International Relations,* vol. 6, no. 1 (March 2000), pp. 77–107; Daniel Deudney, "Regrounding Realism: Anarchy, Security, and Changing Material Contests," *Security Studies,* vol. 10, no. 1 (Autumn 2000), pp. 1–42; Barry R. Posen, "Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power," *International Security*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 80–124; and Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War," *International Organization*, vol. 48, no. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 185–214; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The International Sources of Soviet Change," *International Security*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Winter 1991/1992), pp. 74–118. One of the most important impacts of ideas is they encourage what equilibriums are worth resisting, how much, and why. See Paul W. Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

has been away from unitary states and toward less centralized states.[12] But we can only say this with the benefit of hindsight since it was only relatively recently that Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia mounted muscular challenges to the notion that decentralized states were superior. Subsequently, the number of democracies has risen immensely, but fluctuated quite a bit and is currently falling off.[13] Of course, democratization is not the same as decentralization—democracies are decentralized political systems, but not all decentralized political systems are democracies—but democracies are an indicator of decentralization.[14] Yet even non-democracies have to decentralize to survive and decentralized democracies have to decentralize further.

Leading powers in critical regions are often trendsetters and bellwethers of state structure. Yet in every key region, no leading state or group of states has been able to reverse the trend toward decentralization over the last few decades.[15] In the Western Hemisphere, the United States has been undergoing a period of well-publicized polarization. The distance between the average ideal point of the median Democratic and median Republican in the House of Representatives (or Senate) began

[12] See Reinhart Bendix, *Kings or People: Power and the Mandate to Rule* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1980); Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Daniel H. Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires, and International Change* (Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 2009); William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society Since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); cp. Randall L. Schweller, "Neoclassical Realism and State Mobilization: Expansionist Ideology in the Age of Mass Politics," in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 233–234, 247-250.

[13] See, for example, Seva Gunitsky, *Aftershocks: Great Power and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 2–3; Michael Coppedge et al., eds., *Why Democracies Develop and Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[14] For a more nuanced longue durée discussion, see Deborah Boucoyannis, *Kings as Judges: Power, Justice, and the Origins of Parliaments* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), chaps. 4–6.

[15] For other big picture views on the future, see Daniel Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), chap. 9; Alexander Wendt, "Why a World State is Inevitable," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 9, no. 4 (December 2003), pp. 491–542; Dani Rodrik, "How Far Will International Integration Go?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 14, no. 1(Winter 2000), pp. 177–186; Hendrik Spruyt, "The Origins, Development, and Possible Decline of the Modern State," *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 5 (June 2002), pp. 127–149.

widening gradually around the early to mid-1960s and rose steeply after 1990. Several scholars show that U.S. polarization is highly correlated with international security, and those fissures can capture domestic and foreign policy.[16] It is probably not a coincidence that the last several decades have seen a resurgence in states' rights advocacy. And this should not obscure that sometimes leading states are trend followers. Indeed, if the issue is coping with authority scarcity, then there is much to be learned at the imperial fringe and from non-great powers.

In Asia, Chinese leaders have adopted economic decentralization to cope with an upswing in domestic unrest. But each generation of Chinese leadership grows less powerful and power is ebbing from capital to provinces, though Xi Jinping has tried to reverse this trend.[17] China's size is an enormous outlier—it has over a billion people more than the third most populous state—and it is the only country with one party for over a billion people. Although power is informally devolving in China, its formal centralization looks like an anomaly and a liability.

In Europe, the EU aspires to be a heavyweight with the Chinese and Americans, but has repeatedly failed to centralize enough power to do so.[18] The largest financial crisis in generations failed to cause more than trivial tinkering with the EU's power-sharing bargain, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has fared little better, and political integration within and between states remains lackluster if the goal is to form a United States of Europe. Indeed, autonomist and secessionist groups continue to gather steam (in Spain, in Belgium, in Italy…) and Britain exiting the EU is of a piece with this trend.

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[16] See Joseph Bafumi and Joseph M. Parent, "International Polarity and America's Polarization," *International Politics*, vol. 49, no. 1 (January 2012), pp. 1–35; Paul Musgrave, "International Hegemony Meets Domestic Politics: Why Liberals Can Be Pessimists," *Security Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3 (June/July 2019), pp. 451–478.

[17] See Edward Wong, "China's Growth Slows and Its Political Model Shows Limits," *New York Times*, 11 May 2012. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/11/world/asia/chinas-unique-economic-model-gets-new-scrutiny.html?pagewanted=all.

[18] See Sebastian Rosato, *Europe United: Power Politics and the Making of the European Community* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Geir Lundestad, *The Rise and Decline of the American "Empire"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 53–56.

Wrapping up, the size of the median state is getting smaller and its structure more decentralized, and there is little sign that these tendencies will stop anytime soon. If the world were a country, its population has been growing as its citizens have been getting shorter and leaner. Were there a Gini coefficient that captured the concentration of power instead of income, the world would be coming down from recent highs. It is notoriously hard to spot discontinuities in trends and notoriously dangerous to extrapolate out from present trends. Yet no such discontinuities are on the radar and trends like these seldom change quickly.

The Logic of the Argument: Security and Unity

Why have states gotten smaller and less centralized? My central contention is that states come together to defend themselves from particular threats and come apart when those threats change. Charles Tilly observed that what we now recognize as the default incarnation of states is a relatively recent form with limited appeal.[19] If Tilly's formulation that "war made the state and the state made war" is true, then it follows that a particular kind of war made the modern state, which waged a particular kind of war.[20] Those wars are rarely prepared for and even more rarely fought, but the size and shape of nations lags this reality. This

[19] Charles Tilly, "International communities, secure or otherwise", in Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 407. See also Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 32, 57, 207; Tanisha Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 25–30, 157; and Norman Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms: The Rise and Fall of States and Nations* (New York: Viking, 2012), p. 738.

[20] For theory and practice on changes in war fighting, see Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Coté, Jr., Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *Offense, Defense, and War* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); and Williamson Murray and MacGregor Knox, "Conclusion: the future behind us", in Knox and Murray, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 192–194.

should be interpreted less as a realist claim about power politics than as an analytically eclectic claim, blending multiple paradigms.[21]

Arguably though, the oldest claim in science is the one between security and unity.[22] The earliest extant works are predominantly international politics, and they chronicle an elegant correlation between external threat and internal cooperation. This usually follows a cyclical pattern. Herodotus narrates how the rise of Persia led to Persian corruption and Greek cooperation. Thucydides details how the fall of Persia promoted Greek faction and bipolar security competition. Xenophon tells the story of his command of an outnumbered, surrounded Greek army, whose daring escape was made possible and then jeopardized by its sinuous desperation.[23]

The logic they share is straightforward. Using contemporary language, groups are the main actors and their motivation is to maximize autonomy.[24] This entails two tasks, coordination and distribution, which are in tension. To protect what they hold dear, groups want to gain more power to tilt their odds of victory. But to make the most of victory, participants do not want their group to grow too big—they seek minimum winning coalitions.[25] Participants aim to enlarge the size of

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[21] See Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms: Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Christian Reus-Smit, "Beyond Metatheory?" *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2013), pp. 589–608; Johnathan H. Turner, "The Misuse and Use of Metatheory," *Sociological* Forum, vol. 5, no. 1 (1990), 37–53; Dennis A. Giola and Eveyln Pitre, "Multiparadigm: Perspectives on Theory Building," *Academy of Management: The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 15, no. 4 (October 1990).

[22] Security refers to an individual's probability of mortality from a foreign actor's threat or use of force. By unity or integration I mean how centralized the means of coercion are in a political relationship.

[23] Related arguments can be found unbroken to the present day. See, for example, Stanislav Andreski, *Military Organization and Society* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1971), and Arthur Stein, "Conflict and Cohesion: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 20, no. 1 (March 1976), pp. 143–172.

[24] If groups are the atomic unit of the model, the super-atomic particles are coalitions of various valences and the sub-atomic particles are sub-groups, usually the great versus the many, which repeat in a fractal pattern. My model's main motivation is what Kant described as humanity's "asocial sociability."

[25] See William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962); and Daniel N. Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Chapter 1.

the pie while at the same time jockeying to widen their slice of the pie. In general, external threat determines the compromise between coordination and distribution pressures. The outcome is a curve. Security leads to little unity, but as insecurity increases unity increases too. Threats can become too big or arrive too quickly to be met effectively, and at this point tight integration is not worth the effort, or threats can be too small or slow, causing atrophy.

Conditions are optimal for unity in the middle of the spectrum. Too much centralized power ends in tyranny; too little ends in slavery.[26] Even in the middle of the spectrum, minor choices result in serious indignities. In a frictionless universe, groups reach reasonable conclusions on the available evidence and establish domestic institutions that maximize international competitiveness.[27] Negative feedback and socialization are the mechanisms that propel this process. States that are less competitive will be pressed to copy or improve on their betters or slip into irrelevance.

The logic above applies mainly to traditional threats, i.e. other states' militaries, especially armies.[28] These are the forces that can twist arms with the greatest torque. Of course, threats can take many forms: environmental, economic, epidemiological, celestial, etc. Yet historically, these menaces seldom generate more than tepid or temporary cooperation. These kinds of threats may act as adhesive, but not industrial strength glue. Political unity is chiefly a solution to security problems.[29]

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[26] See Daniel Deudney, "The Philadelphia System: Sovereignty, Arms Control, and Balance of Power in the American States-Union, Circa 1787–1861," *International Organization*, vol. 49, no. 2 (March 1995), pp. 191–228; and David C. Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003).

[27] The standard scientific fine print applies. Views from high altitude are not intended as granular explanations. The world is not frictionless; people are only somewhat rational; structure promotes central tendencies that homogenize outcomes but do not predestine them. Theories are big brooms that sweep some confusion from our minds. But no tool does it all, no combination of tools cleans up everything, and all attempts to do so are provisional.

[28] See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), Chapter 4; and Jack S. Levy, "What Do Great Powers Balance Against and When?" in T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 29–51.

[29] For other efforts to apply related logic to present politics, see Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State* (New York: Free Press, 1994), pp. 294–295; and Michael C. Desch, "War and Strong States, Peace and Weak States?" *International Organization*, vol. 50, no. 2 (Spring 1996), pp. 237–268.

So security is a solvent of political bonds, and these ties can be both within and between states. I should be plain that political groups are not strictly about physical security. Although that is their first function, secondarily, groups (and the highest locus of political loyalty is currently the state) seek wealth and nurture culture. Asked, "What are states good for?" a short answer is: they protect people, pocketbooks, and practices.[30] The foundational point, though, is that states are in the protection business. External threat is a necessary and permissive condition for political integration.

Yet states are a diverse bunch. Without doubt, the process described above is differential, episodic, and slow. The biggest changes in the international system are non-linear and take centuries to reach full effect, e.g. the bubonic plague, gunpowder, mass production, and the birth of nation-states.[31] States fuse, fissure, and reform for many reasons; my claim is only that threat is a factor second to none in the long run.[32] Yet internal traits like settlement patterns, ethnic and religious homogeneity, domestic political institutions, ideology, etc. do play independent roles in group coherence, especially in the short term, and interact with external threats. Political elites can certainly play on these interactions by muting or amplifying them. Societies have different baseline levels of fissiparous propensities, and both internal and external factors are filtered through institutions.

To distill my claims into two independent variables, an intervening variable, and a dependent variable:

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[30] See Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2006), pp. 341–370; and Joseph M. Parent, "Institutions, Identity, and Unity: The Anomaly of Australian Nationalism," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 7, no. 2 (September 2007), pp. 2–28.

[31] See Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors*, Chapters 1–2; and Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *The Arc of War: Origins, Escalation, and Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 2–3, 207, 213.

[32] Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's explanation of state failure uses the same ingredients as my theory, but in inverse proportions. They lay heaviest stress on institutions and internal politics; international security is nearly absent and outside pressures take the form of rare exogenous shocks. Further, their concepts and causal mechanisms are opaque and there is little theoretical content to why states virtuously or viciously spiral. See Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (London: Profile Books, 2012), pp. 113, 168, 180, 309, 332–334, 429–431.

External Security + Internal Divisions [Domestic Institutions] Unity.

Taken together, I argue that states' security is growing increasingly independent (or decreasingly interdependent) from the actions of others. This is a product of a basket of broader changes: the multiplying cost of weapons systems, the nuclear revolution, the diffusion of technology and tactics, peacekeeping, the changing composition of the world economy, and changes in norms, especially nationalism. But the end result makes it harder to deploy force for political goals, and easier for states to maintain their autonomy with less size and centralization.

Alternative Explanations: A Tale of Three Johns

Three authors advocate views rival to mine. John Mearsheimer and other red meat realists see the eternal recurrence of the same state sizes and structures. G. John Ikenberry and other liberals optimistically reassure us the liberal order will continue on post-'45 patterns. Hans Morgenthau and other classical realists flip my argument on its head: the world is so unsafe that only some sort of world federation can protect us. I elaborate and criticize each in turn.

For Mearsheimer, great power politics is a tragic, brutish game where greed often pays. States must always be on the lookout for chances to expand and the ever-present threat of force disciplines state behavior. Bigger is almost always better. To him, the nation-state is not an eternal entity, but it is durable enough to posit as the theoretical foundation for the foreseeable future. Like most, he spends little time speculating on the size and organization of states, except to say that there is a sameness effect and winning advantages will tend to be copied.

Mearsheimer and I agree on great power politics through about 1900, but we increasingly part company after. If states are greedy and security is scarce, then aggression ought to pay and states ought to be more centralized. Instead we see the opposite: capricious great powers failing to take territory, preparing slothfully for war, and suffering when they get ambitious. Great powers struggle with unity, states are getting smaller, and interstate and intrastate wars are increasingly indecisive. The irony

of Mearsheimer's argument is that it describes non-great power politics better than great power politics.[33]

For Ikenberry, hegemons follow their enlightened self-interest and lock in institutions in the periods following major wars. The end prediction is unaltered liberal order: capitalism, democracy, and international institutions will march on mostly unimpaired. Let us set aside whether Ikenberry's description of the history of the liberal order is accurate.[34] He has long contended that today's liberal order will not be significantly different in a decade.

On every score, my argument suggests that the liberal order will essentially change. With respect to capitalism, trade depends on stability, and increasing political entropy will tip global trade increasingly toward regional trade.[35] With declining authority at home and abroad, monitoring and enforcement of agreements will become more difficult and great powers will have to manage the world economy differently. With respect to democracy, if lower threat enables higher income inequality, the forms of democracy will persist but the reality will be plutocracy. With respect to international institutions, they will also stumble under the weight of growing localism. Institutions are creatures of specific distributions of power. As power shifts, institutions must shift too or become shell corporations, and the United Nations has not proven adept at adaptation. This may shrink the importance of global institutions, but not doom institutions overall. Nature abhors vacuums; if the United

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[33] See Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); cf. Lee J. M. Seymour, "Why Factions Switch Sides in Civil Wars: Rivalry, Patronage, and Realignment in Sudan," *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 2 (Fall 2014), pp. 92–131; Costa Pischedda, *Conflict Among Rebels: Why Insurgent Groups Fight Each Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

[34] There are good grounds for thinking it is not. See Richard K. Betts, "Review: Institutional Imperialism," *The National Interest* (May–June 2011), pp. 85–96.

[35] See also Richard N. Rosecrance, Etel Solingen, and Arthur A. Stein, "Globalization and Its Effects: Introduction and Overview", in Rosecrance et co., eds., *No More States? Globalization, National Self-Determination, and Terrorism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), pp. 4–5, 12; Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation-State: The Rise of Regional Economies* (New York: Free Press, 1995). By entropy I intend a decrease in how hierarchical a system is. For a much broader take on entropy in politics, see Randall L. Schweller, "Entropy and the Trajectory of World Politics: Why Polarity Has Become Less Meaningful," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs,* vol. 23, no. 1 (March 2010), pp. 145–163.

Nations evolves too slowly, states and regional institutions will probably fill the gaps.

When I first made this argument publicly (in a debate with Ikenberry in Oslo), it was unquestionably a loser. A decade on, it is no longer so clear, and who knows how things will look in another decade? But it is now no longer controversial, and Ikenberry's claims are.[36] The ground has shifted and Ikenberry has drawn in his horns, but, if my logic is correct, he will likely have to continue to do so for at least another decade.

For Morgenthau, World War II changed everything: great power politics became radically unsafe.[37] He is in great company. E. H. Carr states, "what might have been workable economic or military units in the 18th or nineteenth centuries have become impracticable in the light of modern conditions of industrial production or military technique."[38] John Herz echoes, "Perhaps never in the history of mankind has a situation existed which so clearly and acutely illustrated the 'security dilemma' with its temptation to exercise power in a 'preventive' way, to 'kill in order not to be killed,'".[39] George Kennan adds, "it is not enough even to eliminate nuclear weapons from the national arsenals; that the day has passed when war itself in any form, conventional or otherwise, is permissible."[40] Daniel Deudney declares, "nuclear weapons have rendered the statist approach to security nonviable."[41] Some sort of federation appeared to be the least distasteful option, though as time

[36] See David Lake, Lisa Martin, and Thomas Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization," *International Organization*, vol. 75, no. 2 (Spring 2021), pp. 225–257; Markus Kornprobst and T.V. Paul, "Globalization, Deglobalization and the Liberal International Order," *International Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 5 (September 2021), pp. 1305–1316; Jack L. Snyder, "The Broken Bargain," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 98, no. 2 (March/April 2019), pp. 54–60. For Ikenberry's most recent statement, see his *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

[37] See Morgenthau in David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), introduction.

[38] E.H. Carr, *Nationalism and After* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), p. 47.

[39] John Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 239.

[40] Deudney, *Bounding Power*, p. 248.

[41] George F. Kennan, *At a Century's Ending: Reflections 1982–1995* (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 70; cf. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (New York: Norton, 1993), Chapter 4.

went on some despaired of its practicality. Whether we fully realize it or not, they claim, power politics invites apocalypse and more integration is the best solution.

Where we all agree is that there is a link between insecurity and unity, but we differ on the current danger level. My depiction of the world is of international security leading to domestic fragmentation, theirs is of international insecurity promoting domestic agglomeration. But if they are right, why have so many people been so wrong for so long about the path to personal safety?[42] World federation has not been a viable political idea in any state ever, much less on the scale necessary to achieve something close to it.

To lay the theoretical options on the table, there are three main alternatives to my argument. Recent realists like Mearsheimer seldom theorize the size and structure of states other than positing that great powers tend to copy systemic innovations. Liberals like Ikenberry see the post-World War II order as highly durable because it has been so beneficial to the leading powers. Classical realists like Morgenthau await an institutional cascade away from the nation-state, which now imperils the people it was designed to protect.

Discussion

I am neither a swami nor the son of a swami; the future is foggy to us all. But if my logic is closer to the mark than my rivals', then the usual dynamics of power will continue to play out, but in a more decentralized manner. Conflicts, authority, legitimacy, and identity are all devolving to lower levels of world politics. The world has changed a lot faster than the

[42] While my claim may be broadly true, the evidence is more mixed among experts. Most scholars of international security believe nuclear weapons make the world less safe, though few believe it strongly enough to suggest political integration. Dissenting voices include John Mueller, John Mearsheimer, and Ken Waltz.

institutions in its leading states. As Edmund Morgan points out: "Government requires make-believe," but over long periods of time facts and fictions have to move closer together.[43]

If the world is ripe for a period of institutional innovation, I argue that the new world provides instructive templates. There are several reasons behind this. First, early American sovereignty featured many experiments in flexible federalism. In fact the Atlantic republican tradition remains at the cutting edge of what little we know about durable governmental forms.[44] In the words of Walter McDougall, "America was not just born of revolution, it is one."[45] Power is spreading out now, but we do not know how much and federations offer institutional versatility that can move with the times. Relatedly, federations are not only good at shared and overlapping authorities, they are also good at various scales, though classically federations are more associated with smaller states.

More broadly, as state strength saps, non-state actors will garner greater attention and aspiring state-like groups will acquire greater authority. Although states will still be the preeminent actors in politics, power is relative and losses in one area must be offset in others. If the past is any guide, the military and the wealthy are most likely to be the big gainers, and the new world is replete with educational examples of reining in militaries and oligarchs… and failing to do so.[46]

In mirror-image reaction to these concentrations of power, new versions of old groups will likely undergo a renaissance: rural regulators, violent conspiracy theorists, anarchists, and messianic conservatives—all of which figure prominently in the Americas. To compete against each other, groups will be fiercely tempted to socially sort and become more exclusive. Without traditional threats shoring up central

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[43] Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988), pp. 13–14, 152.

[44] See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jacques Barzun, "Is Democratic Theory for Export?" *Ethics and International Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1 (December 1987), pp. 53–71; Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[45] Walter A. McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History, 1585–1828* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), p. xiv.

[46] See Félix Martín, *Militarist Peace in South America: Conditions for War and Peace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

authority, peripheral actors will increasingly develop into statelets. The vast majority of these will fail, but that is only to be expected in any winnowing process. Some will succeed and help redefine international politics.

Naturally, failed experiments can be equally illuminating to successful ones. Initially, the state of Georgia sought to keep slavery off its territory, but the potential profits were too alluring to resist. Rhode Island was slandered around the United States for its affection for referenda. South Carolina had a constitution written for it by no less than John Locke, but the attempt was abortive because it did not delegate sufficient power to the state assembly.[47] Understanding why things went wrong could help resurrect ideas that came too soon, and avoid recycling spent ideas or worshipping obsolete successes.

Another informative aspect of the new world experience is economic. Despite the conventional wisdom, early American exchange was never a stable triangle trade. The new world economies got started on unstable, unpredictable geometries based on small networks and intermittent oversight.[48] No one knows what the economic future has in store, but with the great power pecking order coming under increasing strain and the world economy looking like nothing seen before, it behooves analysts to study trade relations when scarcity was a stricter disciplinarian and trade networks were forced to be more resourceful.[49]

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[47] See Patrick T. Conley and John P. Kaminski, eds., *The Constitution and the States: The Role of the Original Thirteen in the Framing and Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (Madison: Madison House, 1988); Morgan, *Inventing the People*, p. 129; Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Pauline Maier, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787–1788* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010); Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Akhil Reed Amar, *America's Constitution: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2005); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998).

[48] See Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, p. 47; Emily A. Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The British East India Company, 1600–1757* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014); Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477–1806* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); A. J. R. Russell-Wood, *The Portuguese Empire, 1415–1808: A World on the Move* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

[49] See Ronald Finley and Kevin H. O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Milennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 535, 539; Thomas Allison Kirk, *Genoa and the Sea: Policy and Power in an Early Modern Maritime Republic, 1559–1684* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Roger Crowley,

To properly caveat my claims, no models can be exported wholesale anywhere. Local circumstance is vital to constructing enduring institutions and world historical time has marched on.[50] Furthermore, the early Americas are hardly the only states that have dealt with fragmented authority, difficult force projection, green governments, unstable trade networks, and so on. My case is merely that the parallels are useful and under-appreciated, and that the American data is richer and more reliable than most. As always, other perspectives and evidence are welcome. Finally, one should retain a healthy respect for contingency. The Catalans could have been beaten out by the Genoese in Spain's domestic market, or Isabella could have married the Portuguese king instead of Ferdinand, or Spain could have been more united, or Bolívar could have preferred Madison over Rousseau—all of which would have caused substantial institutional waves in the new world.[51]

Conclusion

In confusing times, it makes sense to start with the fundamentals. This chapter has argued that the first and most enduring argument in politics is that security and unity are stars that seldom align for long. This is at odds with how all of us would like the world to work. Carved in relief on the Nobel Peace Prize is the inscription *Pro Pace et Fraternitate Gentium*—for peace and brotherhood. It is a happy state of affairs when

City of Fortune: How Venice Ruled the Seas (New York: Random House, 2013); David S. Landes, *the Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 522.

[50] For example, Louis Hartz famously argued that the American experiment was crucially affected by the absence of feudalism and the presence of liberal ideas. Yet present institution builders would now have to deal with new legacies and ideas. See Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1991), p. 20.

[51] For these and other counterfactuals, see J. H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain, 1469–1716* (New York: Penguin 2002), pp. 39, 42–43, 79; Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 106; Robert Cowley, ed., *The Collected What If? Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (New York: Putnam, 2001).

humanity's odds of violent death are so low,[52] but we must square up to the problem that peace pulls people apart.

There is no sense in complaining about the weather; little can be done to change the structure of world politics, but something can be done to adapt to changing circumstances. Two recommendations follow. First, decentralize steadily. Elevated social strife and economic stratification are likely here to stay, as are polarized politics and rashes of extremist violence. The best defenses against the excesses of tumultuous politics are strong minority rights and flexible federal systems, though alone or combined these measures are no cure-all. Inflexibility has its dangers (shattering of authority) but so does excessive flexibility (runaway institutional breakdown and the violence that tends to erupt in it).

This leads to the second recommendation: institutional innovation. Indeed, federalism is designed to be a laboratory for just such experiments. Minorities are the majorities of tomorrow, but not all minorities can be majorities. Great powers should rethink what constitutes a viable state and whether alternate institutional forms should be invented to lend legitimacy to entities that function differently. In addition, if states are going to split and mutate, great powers ought to set up better guidelines to manage the process.[53] Although there are harsh limits to what states can do, that is no excuse for isolationism or inaction. The soil of international politics is changing and some combination of new flora is bound to bloom: unique federal systems, pan-ethic or pan-religious confederations, innovative small states, perhaps non-territorial communities.

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[52] See Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011) and John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004). For more nuanced views, see Boaz Atzili, *Good Fences, Bad Neighbors: Border Fixity and International Conflict* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012), Chapters 2,7; Christoher J. Fettweis, *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

[53] For the state of the art on this problem, see James Fearon and David Laitin, "Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States," *International Security*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Spring 2004), pp. 5–43; and Stephen Krasner, "Sharing Sovereignty: New Institutions for Collapsed and Failing States," *International Security*, vol. 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004), pp. 85–120.

In these circumstances, consulting new world examples is only sensible. Politically, the new world has seen a great deal of intertwined authority, meager force projection, institutional novelty, and young regimes struggling to assert authority. Economically, the early Americas dealt with uncertain and unstable trade relationships, weak central control, low budgets, and shifting geopolitical alignments. And that is a healthy reminder. It is a misperception to see international relations as breaking down; old worlds coming apart only means new worlds coming together.

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