

Superpowers, Hyperpowers and Uberpowers

“States are cold monsters who mate for convenience and self-protection, not love”

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INTRODUCTION

We are living in the great exception. Throughout history (barring our own modern global order), there has never been a single global international system—hence, there has never before been a truly global hegemon.² The title of this article reflects the popular use of the terms superpower and hyperpower. However, there is no wide spread agreement on the meaning of these terms. For the purposes of conceptual clarity, I offer the following explanation.

The world has seen a number of regional hegemony rise and fall—several of which have exercised extensive control—but it was not until the Cold War that any one hegemon possessed the power of life and death over the entire planet. During the Cold War, there were two such powers. The need to avoid a nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers turned the Cold War into an ideological war. Consequently, the US and the Soviet Union also dominated the world politically and economically to an extent never before seen.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, all that power passed to the United States—and the world’s first hyperpower was born. The new term captured America’s role as the *only* superpower in the world. No longer would the US be limited by an opposing force—the hyperpower would do as it wished—and unfortunately, it has. Fortunately, hegemony never lasts forever.

There is a popular international relations concept known as long cycles. Although there have been both various interpretations and applications of the construct, the basic idea is that there are four waves or cycles through which hegemony passes. First, the uncontested hegemon begins to decline. Second, a contender

arises. Third, the two powers compete for geopolitical and economic superiority. Finally, a new power emerges as the uncontested hegemon, and the cycle repeats itself.³

Contrary to Amy Chua’s claim that there have been several hyperpowers throughout history,⁴ I argue that the United States is the first hyperpower because as a superpower it possesses global military, political and economic leverage never before seen in the history of the world.

My position also differs from World System theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein, who argue that Rome and Han China were examples of world empires. They distinguish world empires from ordinary empires such as the British empire in that they monopolized the center of power. But I argue that this was not so. How could it have been when Rome and Han China were contemporaries that, in all likelihood, didn’t even know about the other’s existence?⁵

What follows is a brief outline of the history of continental Asia, Europe and the United States. This is not an exhaustive account, nor could it be in the space allowed. The main reasons for choosing to focus on these areas to the exclusion of all others are two fold. First, the majority of the world’s population has always resided in Asia. Second, I focus on Europe and the United States because no other regions of the world have had so great an impact on the modern world as these two. The purpose of this chapter is to establish an historical pattern which we can then theoretically apply to the future. While no one has a crystal ball, I believe that this approach is the next best thing.

THE ANCIENT WORLD: FROM THE CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION AND BEYOND

The story of the ancient world order is a cyclical one—from the city-states of Sumer to the fall of the Roman Empire, the overall pattern has consistently been the progression from a balance of power to a hegemonic system. From the earliest civilizations, local multipolar systems gave way to hegemony. Once established, the hegemon typically expanded to the extent possible until a new balance of power emerged. This cycle repeated itself again and again with each hegemonic system growing larger and more powerful until there was simply no more room for expansion—and thus our current international system evolved.

SUMER (C. 5800—1750 BCE)

The patriarch Abraham is recorded as originally coming from Ur of the Chaldees—one of the famed city-states of Sumer located near the present-day Persian Gulf. Most people don't realize it, but when Abraham headed out for the land of Canaan, he most likely left behind a comfortable home in a highly urban center. Located within the lush Fertile Crescent, Sumer is believed to have been one of the earliest and most advanced civilizations of the ancient world. Based upon the discovery of Chinese pottery carbon dated at over 20,000 years old, China almost certainly predates it, but the written records we *currently* possess point to Sumer.⁶ I would not be surprised if that changes in the foreseeable future.

According to the ancient Sumerians, civilization itself began when the gods descended from heaven to Sumer and created Eridu (present day Abu Shahrein in Iraq)—both the first human city and home to the great god Enki (the god of wisdom and magic).⁷ It's believed that the original settlers of Sumer did not speak the Sumerian language. This assumption is based upon the fact that the names of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (in cuneiform: Idiglat and Buranun) and the names of most of its urban centers are not Sumerian⁸

So, who were these early settlers of Sumer? No one knows for certain, however, archeologists have dubbed them the Ubaid people—a name taken from the mound of al-Ubaid.⁹ Based upon artifacts excavated at the mound of al-Ubaid, archeologists date the Ubaid Period c. 5800—4000 BCE.¹⁰ Various grave goods found in burial sites suggest that the Ubaid period experienced progressive social stratification,

with a large class of society suffering downward social mobility while a small elite class of hereditary rulers grew rich.¹¹

Yale University's Frank Hole argues that settlement in southern Mesopotamia was a response to “extraordinary environmental conditions” that triggered a “shift from village-based agrarian societies to complex, urban civilization.”¹² These environmental forces included rising sea levels (the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the Arabian Gulf) and climate change.¹³

Urbanization increased during the Uruk Period (c. 4100—2900 BCE) as populations continued to migrate from the countryside and concentrate within a handful of urban centers (Uruk, Eridu, Ur, Nippur, Kish).¹⁴ The city of Uruk became prominent, and kings also began to emerge during this period.¹⁵ Just as the names of the rivers and cities are not Sumerian, the names of Sumer's earliest kings are not Sumerian either, but Semitic.¹⁶

Whoever originally founded it, the Sumerian civilization bequeathed a number of legacies to the rest of mankind: writing, the wheel, cities, sailing, trading, agriculture, irrigation, religion and perhaps its most enduring legacy of all—its hegemonic system of governance.

Unlike other ancient civilizations such as Egypt or Assyria, Sumer never became an empire per se. Rather, it was a loose confederation of city-states—each with its own hereditary monarchy and its own patron deity. What tied these city-states together was their common culture, extensive trade networks and a complex system of government and religion.

The Sumerians were polytheistic, and they believed that the earth simply mirrored the heavens. Thus, each city-state belonged to a single deity (god or goddess). The king of each city-state was the recognized representative of its deity. In return for their devotion, the Sumerians believed that their deity provided them with an abundance of food and water and with protection from the elements and from their enemies.

For me, the most interesting aspect of the Sumerian religion is the way in which it affected Sumerian politics. Just as the Sumerians believed that the gods struggled among themselves for domination of the heavens, so they also struggled for hegemony over one another on earth. Therefore, there was endless conflict between the kings of the city-states as

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they battled over access to resources and hegemony of the land.

Hegemony didn't give the king of the ruling city-state the freedom to control the other city-states or to meddle in their internal dealings, however. Instead, the hegemon served as a mediator—equipped with the authority to resolve disputes and wielding the power to enforce a settlement. The hegemon possessed legitimacy because it was sanctioned as such by the priests of Enlil—the chief deity of the Sumerian pantheon—whose seat of worship resided in the city of Nippur. This is not unlike the Chinese Mandate of Heaven (more on this in Chapter Four).

Thus, while each city-state was governed separately by its own hereditary monarchy, hegemony over all the city-states was sanctioned via both the Sumerian religion and the need to maintain some type of order among the constantly warring kings. When the time came that the hegemon either became too weak to maintain its position or too abusive in its management, other city-states would balance against it and replace it with a new hegemon. Harkening back to the matter regarding which international system was more prevalent, the balancers were right in one respect—Sumerian city-states did sometimes balance against the hegemon, but not for the reasons the balancers suppose. Rather than balancing to prevent a hegemon from emerging, the ancient Sumerians balanced in order to replace the existing hegemon with a new one.

Extensive trade networks eventually brought the Sumerians as far East as India; as far north as Anatolia, the Caucasus and Central Asia; as far west as the Mediterranean Sea; and as far south as Egypt and Ethiopia. Via these trade networks, Sumerian influences reached out for thousands of miles in every direction.¹⁷

Trade also brought conflict, both between the various Sumerian city-states and with other peoples in the region. Chief among the Sumerians' many enemies were the Semitic empires of Babylon and Assyria.¹⁸ These civilizations borrowed heavily from the Sumerians, especially the idea that each kingdom had its own patron deity and that these deities battled one another for supremacy both in heaven and on earth. So, for example when the Babylonians rose to power, it was more-or-less accepted that their god, Marduk, had obtained supremacy over all the other deities. Thus, the king of Babylon, as Marduk's

representative on earth, possessed the legitimate right to exercise hegemony over the remaining states in the entire region.¹⁹

It's quite possible that influence traveled in both directions, as the concept of kingship in Sumer began to change c. 2900 BCE. During what is now known as the Early Dynastic Period (c. 2900—2334 BCE) the Sumerian *ensi* (priest-king) was replaced by the *lugal* (big man). It was during this period that Sumer witnessed the rise of the First Dynasty of Lagash (c. 2500 BCE). From Lagash, King Eannatum ruled an empire encompassing nearly all of Sumer and territories in bordering Elam.²⁰

Around 2234 BCE, a Semitic ruler named Sargon of Akkad (c. 2334—2279 BCE) rose up. Also known as Sargon the Great, Sargon conquered the territories of Mesopotamia—establishing the Akkadian Empire (c. 2234—2218 BCE). From Akkad, Sargon ruled over all of Mesopotamia and claimed to control all the lands from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea.²¹ The Akkadian empire was relatively short-lived, however.

It's been speculated that the empire collapsed due to a 300-year drought in the north where most of the food was grown. Mass migration to the south emptied cities in the north and exacerbated tensions as people fought over scarce resources. The Gutians invaded from modern-day Iran in the north and laid waste to the empire's major cities. Some of those forced to flee the northern region were the Amorites—nomadic herders who moved south for water and clashed with local residents who built a 108-mile wall to keep them out. When the drought ended c. 1900 BCE, the Akkadian Empire was ruined, but the Amorites had gained power in Babylon where their most famous descendent—Hammurabi—would rule a century later.²²

Thus, a new era of multipolarity began which would endure until the Assyrian Empire rose to power two centuries later.²³ Meanwhile, hegemony was taking shape in neighboring Egypt.

EGYPT (C. 5000 BCE —PRESENT DAY)

Egypt shared a similar experience to that of Sumer. Archeological discoveries such as a village site in the Eastern Desert (c. 5000 BCE) suggest a complex society of farmers, bakers, cattle herders, fishermen, sailors, artisans, slaves and traders.²⁴ It's believed that several such villages sprung up along the Nile, and over time

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transformed into city states such as the walled city of Hierakonpolis (c. 3500 BCE)—each with its own religious temples and political system.²⁵ Each city-state is presumed to have had its own totem god. As these city states began to unite into the upper and lower kingdoms, the various totem gods were assimilated into Egypt's pantheon. There is even some speculation that these early inhabitants traded with the people of Sumer via the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula.²⁶

A stone tablet known as the Narmer Palette (c. 3000 BCE) depicts the first king to unite upper and lower Egypt. Narmer (also known as Menes) founded the first capital city in ancient Egypt—Men Nefer—which is better known by its Greek name, Memphis.²⁷

The ancient Egyptians depended on the seasonal flooding of the Nile to irrigate their fields. Droughts (caused by volcanic eruptions) quickly led to crop failure, and famine led to civil unrest.²⁸

Egypt successfully absorbed foreign invaders (such as the Hyksos and the Nubians) until the first Persian conquest when Cambyses II defeated Psametik III at Pelusium in 525 BCE. As a result, Egypt's 27th dynasty signaled the beginning of the end for Ancient Egyptian sovereignty. Although Cambyses II reigned as pharaoh, Egypt was in fact joined with Cyprus and Phoenicia as a satrapy of the Achaemenid Empire. Egypt briefly regained its sovereignty in 404 BCE, however, Nectanebo II lost the Battle of Pelusium to Artaxerxes III in 343 BCE. Once again, the Egyptians forfeited the throne to the Achaemenid Empire where it would remain until Alexander the Great took it for himself in 332 BCE. Following Alexander's death in 323 BCE, the Ptolemies ruled Egypt for 275 years (305—30 BCE).²⁹

While the reign of the Ptolemies officially came to an end with the suicide of Cleopatra in 30 BCE, the dynasty's power had been steadily diminishing for over a decade by drought and famine caused by volcanic eruptions. Widespread famine sparked revolts, forcing the state to divert funds normally earmarked for military campaigns to putting down internal unrest. As with the Akkadian Empire, the center couldn't hold, and power quickly changed hands as the Ptolemies fell to the Romans in 30 BCE.

ASSYRIA (2025—609 BCE)

Further to the east, Assyria was on the rise. What began as the tiny city-state of Assur (c.

2600 BCE) was to become one of the fiercest empires the world has ever known. Named after its national god, Assur sat on the west bank of the Tigris River—approximately 245 kilometers north of modern-day Baghdad.³⁰ Assur was just one of several Akkadian-speaking city-states that were pulled into the orbit of the Akkadian Empire. Following the 300-year drought that wiped it out, the Akkadian Empire fragmented back into its constituent parts until Assyria rose up and dominated the region.

Within two centuries, the Assyrian Empire would dominate the ancient Near East.³¹ At its height, the colossus controlled a vast realm extending east to west from modern-day Iran to the Mediterranean, and north-south from the Caucasus to the Arabian Peninsula.³²

But then, within just a few decades, the mighty behemoth was no more—and there is evidence that drought and famine may have played a significant role. Due to the practice of resettling conquered peoples, the population of the Assyrian capital city Nineveh became unsustainable. During the reign of Sennacherib alone (705—681 BCE), roughly 500,000 people were forcibly relocated. In a predominantly agrarian society, more farmers meant greater wealth and prosperity for the empire. However, when a sustained drought began in 657 BCE, successive crop failures brought the earth's greatest military power to its knees. By 609 BCE, Assyria was ripe for the picking, and a coalition of weaker powers took it down.³³

The progression from multipolarity to hegemony and back would repeat itself numerous times in the ancient world with the rise and fall of the Babylonians, the Medes, the Achaemenid Empire, Greece, Rome, the Parthians and the Sassanids.

THE NEO-BABYLONIAN EMPIRE (C. 626—539 BCE)

Babylon was just a small town in the days of the Akkadian Empire, and it became subject to the Assyrians once they dominated the region. Babylon enjoyed a brief period of regional hegemony under the famed Hammurabi (c. 1792—1750 BCE), but that quickly faded after Hammurabi's death. Another period of Babylonian hegemony emerged in the wake of the Assyrian Empire. Following Ashurbanipal's death in 627 BCE, a string of civil wars hamstrung Assyrian power. The hegemon that had dominated the region for more than a

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thousand years was finally losing its lifeforce, and the vultures began to circle.

Chafing under the Assyrian yoke, Nabopolassar (king of Babylonia) rebelled with a coalition consisting of the Medes under Cyaxares, the Persians, the Scythians, and the Cimmerians. Nabopolassar eventually defeated Assyria—taking Nineveh in 612 BCE and Harran in 609 BCE. Shortly afterward, Nabopolassar died and his son Nebuchadnezzar consolidated the empire with his victory at Carchemish in 605 BCE. Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon was bordered by the Cimmerians and the Scythians to the north, the Medes to the northeast, Persia on its southeastern border, the Arab Peninsula to the south, Egypt on its southwestern border and Lydia to the northwest.³⁴

THE MEDIAN EMPIRE (678—549 BCE)

The Medes were originally a number of separate tribes living in the western and northern regions of modern-day Iran. These tribes came together to form the Median Kingdom in the mid-seventh century. Still a vassal state of Assyria, the Medes broke free from the Assyrian yoke under Cyaxerxes (624—585 BCE) and forged alliances with both Babylon and Lydia (Nebuchadnezzar and Croesus each married one of Cyaxerxes' daughters). The Median Empire extended from modern-day Iran to the eastern border of Lydia.

THE ACHAEMENID EMPIRE (550—330 BCE)

The Persians settled in what is now southwestern Iran and eventually fell under domination by the Medes. In 553 BCE, Cyrus the Great led the Persians in rebellion against the Medes. Cyrus captured the capital city, Ecbatana, in 550 BCE and pushed west to defeat both the Babylonians and the Lydians. At its peak, the Achaemenid Empire was larger than any empire before it, stretching from Eastern Europe to the Indus Valley.³⁵ Nearly a century after the fall of Assyria, multipolarity had again given way to hegemony. Farther west, nestled between the Aegean and Ionian seas, a new power was about to take the world by storm.

GREECE (C. 3200 BCE—PRESENT DAY)

Ancient Greece is yet another example of the progression from multipolarity to hegemony in action. From the establishment of city-states (c. 750 BCE) to the Peloponnesian Wars and beyond, balance of power was the name of the game as various powers vied for political hegemony. On the international stage, Persian

attempts to conquer the Greek city-states were thwarted until a new hegemon appeared on the scene. The death of Philip II of Macedon (336 BCE) marked the beginning of one of the most remarkable consolidations of power in history. In just 13 years, Alexander became the acknowledged hegemon of the Corinthian League and conquered the entire Achaemenid Empire.³⁶ But his reign was destined to be a short one. In 323 BCE, Alexander died at the age of 32. A civil war ensued, and his vast empire was divided up into four blocs: the Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt, the Seleucid empire in Mesopotamia and Central Asia, the Attalid Dynasty in Asia Minor, and the Antigonid Dynasty in Macedon.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE (1500 BCE—1453 CE)

Archaeologists believe that Rome was settled around 1500 BCE. As in other areas, the early inhabitants of Rome established many separate villages. During the Regal Period (753—509 BCE), Rome was ruled by kings. In 509 BCE a group of patricians deposed the king and declared a republic. By 200 BCE, Rome dominated Italy, and over the next two centuries the once tiny city-state controlled Spain, France, Greece, the Middle East and North Africa, and Britain.

Initially Rome extended citizenship to those it conquered, but by 265 BCE it discontinued this practice. Newly conquered lands became Roman provinces, but the inhabitants had no rights or representation in the Roman senate—in fact, many were enslaved. By 100 BCE, approximately one third of the population were slaves and 25% constituted the urban poor. Riots were frequent. As the senate struggled to hold on to power, it named Julius Caesar dictator for life in 45 BCE (then assassinated him a year later). Attempts at recreating a republic disintegrated into civil war, and in 27 BCE Octavius appointed himself Augustus (emperor)—the Roman Empire had begun.³⁷

Under the reign of Augustus (27 BCE — 14 CE), Rome dominated the Mediterranean world and would continue to do so for another four centuries. But the important thing to remember about Rome (or any ancient empire for that matter) is that it never dominated the entire globe. Rome always had political rivals such as Carthage and Persia—and it probably was not even aware of China.

Rome had other enemies as well. Around the middle of the second century, climate change in

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the form of devastating cold spells triggered famines. As if that were not enough, in 165 CE, Roman armies returning from conquest (and/or merchants arriving along extensive trade routes) carried with them the Antonine Plague—one of the first recorded pandemics in history. By 190 CE, the death toll reached roughly eight million. Sixty years later, a horrific drought followed by yet another pandemic (the Plague of Cyprian) scourged the empire for more than a decade. The massive death toll caused the crisis of the third century—a nearly complete breakdown in Rome’s imperial system caused by a lack of manpower and especially troops. Usurpers seized the throne one after another as infrastructure began to crumble and enemies breached the empire’s borders.³⁸

Then Mother Nature dealt the final devastating blow. A megadrought around 370 CE forced the nomadic Huns westward into the Danube region triggering tens of thousands of Goths to cross the Danube into the Roman Empire. Tribes of Goths wreaked havoc inside the empire and even sacked the city of Rome in 410 CE.³⁹

Imperial overstretch eventually split the Roman empire in two. By 476 CE, the western half of the empire succumbed to invasions from Germanic tribes as Odoacer deposed the last western Roman emperor—a ten-year-old boy named Romulus Augustulus. Nearly a millennium later, after centuries of war, the Eastern half of the empire fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE.⁴⁰

THE MIDDLE EAST

While the term, “Middle East,” wasn’t used until much later, the region has largely become synonymous with the religion of Islam.⁴¹ There is no clear consensus regarding its actual geographic boundaries, but the region is traditionally viewed as extending north to Turkey, west to Egypt, south to Yemen and east to Iran. The Arab world—with language being the main unifying element—is equally difficult to define.

As geographic regions, the Middle East and the Arab World are fluid. Their story is one of constant upheaval. The combined inhabitants of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Libya represent roughly 5 percent of the total population of the earth, and yet the region is responsible for nearly 60 percent of the planet’s refugees and almost 70 percent all battle-related deaths worldwide.⁴² The history of this region is a

classic example of the progression from multipolarity to hegemony (and back again).

Several centuries after Alexander the Great conquered the Achaemenid Empire, the Parthian Empire (247 BCE — 224 CE) grew from a small kingdom in northeast Persia to dominate an area stretching from modern-day Turkey to Iran. The Parthians engaged in constant hostilities with Rome until their last king, Artabanus IV, died in battle against the Sassanids in April 224 CE. The Sasanian Empire (224 — 651 CE) succeeded the Parthians and expanded Persian territory north into the Caucasus and Central Asia, east to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and south to include parts of Syria, Palestine, Egypt and the eastern Gulf countries.⁴³

The Sasanian Empire was one of the great powers in the region along with the Byzantine Empire—the Sassanids’ bitter enemy—and the Aksumite Empire in Ethiopia. These three powers each contended for control of the Himyarite Kingdom in Yemen via client tribes. The Aksumites and Sassanids fought a series of wars and occupied Southern Arabia. The Aksumites from 525 — 575 CE and the Sassanids from 575–625 CE.⁴⁴

Pirates in the Red Sea and frequent wars between the Byzantines and Sassanids meant that trade was increasingly diverted to the overland route from Syria to Yemen in Western Arabia. Mecca grew in prominence as trade caravans stopped along the way to worship the various pagan deities housed at the Ka’ba. It was here in Mecca that a new type of empire would be born.

THE RISE OF ISLAM

In one sense you could argue that the rise of Islam marked the end of the ancient world and the beginning of something entirely new. Traditional accounts describe the tribes of Arabia as uniting under Muhammad in the years 630—631 CE. During this period, known as the Year of Delegations, tribal representatives swore their allegiance to the Prophet and his newly-created state. However, one could also argue along with Solomon that there’s nothing new under the sun. Within just two years, the ancient tribal divisions re-emerged. The Arab conquests provided a common enemy for a time, but the cohesion didn’t last. Before long, the Arabs themselves became subjugated by the Turks, the Persians, Berbers and various Europeans.⁴⁵

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The Ottoman Empire rose to prominence in the 14th century and dominated the region until its defeat in World War One (WWI).⁴⁶ The region then fell under the control of the French and British imperial mandate systems. Much of the political upheaval in the Middle East stems from the arbitrary borders that were created by the Sykes–Picot Agreement, the establishment of the state of Israel, and the continual intervention of western powers in the region. In the pages that follow, we'll examine how this region came to be what it is today.

An Arab tribe known as the Quraysh ruled Mecca, and this is the tribe to which the Prophet Muhammad (571—632 CE) belonged. Following his conversion to Islam, Muhammad consolidated power among the tribes in the Hijaz (western Saudi Arabia) and ruled from Medina.

After his death, the Arab tribes renounced their treaties with Muhammad. His successor, Abu-Bakr (r. 632 — 634 CE), fought the Ridda Wars to reconsolidate control over the tribes.⁴⁷ Umar (r. 634 — 644 CE) expanded the caliphate northward by battling Byzantine and Sassanid forces, and in just over ten years his successor, Uthman (r. 644 — 656 CE) controlled Palestine, Syria, Egypt and parts of Libya. By 651 CE, Uthman had conquered the entire Sasanid Empire, and by 655 CE he took Cyprus. His net worth is estimated to have been over \$100 million.⁴⁸

Subsequent to the assassination of both Uthman and his successor Ali (r. 656 — 661 CE), Uthman's cousin, Mu'awiya, established the Umayyad Dynasty (c. 661 — 750 CE) and made Damascus his capital. Mu'awiya's son, Yazid, succeeded him, and from that time on, the position of caliph was hereditary. The Abbasid Dynasty (c.750 — 1258 CE) overthrew the Umayyads and transferred their capital to Baghdad. At its height, the caliphate extended from Spain to the borders of China (excluding the Byzantine Empire). By the middle of the tenth century, the Abbasid's had forfeited territory to a myriad of other dynasties (Tulunids, Fatimids, Ghaznavids, Uighurs, Seljuks, Ayyubids). In 1258 CE, the Mongols sacked Baghdad and continued westward toward Aleppo and Damascus.⁴⁹

THE MONGOLS AND THE MAMLUKS

While not much is known about the Mongols prior to the twelfth century, the Mongolian language is closely related to both Turkish and

Tungusic.⁵⁰ Trade and commerce along the Silk Road connected China to the Achaemenid Empire via Central Asia. Nomads often protected trade caravans as they passed through the vast expanses of the Great Steppe. Others, such as the Mongol tribes, dashed down from the north and attacked them.⁵¹

A Mongol chief named Genghis Khan, consolidated the eastern Mongol tribes in the late twelfth century. The Mongols pursued the path toward hegemony, and within a century they created the largest contiguous empire ever to be ruled by a single person in history—expanding into China, India, and westward all the way to Europe.⁵²

When we think of empire, the first name to come to mind is usually Rome. However, the Roman empire was tiny in comparison. Covering roughly one million square miles, Rome was a mere fraction of the Mongol Empire which spanned nine million square miles at its height in the late thirteenth century.⁵³

We can clearly see the progression from multipolarity to hegemony in the history of the Mongols. We can also see this pattern repeating itself today. Most of the modern-day states in Eurasia and the Middle East were once a part of the Mongol realm. After the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258 CE, they moved on to take Damascus and Aleppo. The Mamluks—slaves who had become the dominant faction in the caliphate's military—defeated the Mongols, and the Mamluk Sultanate dominated Egypt and Syria for the next two centuries. The Turkish Mamluks ruled from 1250 — 1381 CE, and the Circassian Mamluks reigned from 1382 — 1517 BC.⁵⁴

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE (1299— 1923 CE)

The Ottoman Empire had its humble beginnings in northwestern Anatolia. Founded by a Turkish tribal elder named Osman I in 1299 CE, legend has it that the Turkish tribes in the area had fled their ancestral homeland in Khurasan (modern day Afghanistan, southern Tajikistan and northeastern Iran) to escape the Mongols.⁵⁵ At its height under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520 — 1566 CE), the Ottoman Empire spanned three continents and controlled much of the Mediterranean Sea. Over the next four centuries, it would lose much of this territory and ultimately be partitioned following its catastrophic loss in WWI. For much of this period, its two arch enemies were Russia and Austria-Hungary.

In the west, we're largely taught that World War One (WWI) brought about the end of the Ottoman Empire—and in some respects this is true—the Great War certainly drove the last nail into the coffin. But a more realistic interpretation of history needs to also take into consideration the important geopolitical position the Ottoman Empire occupied at the hub of Europe, Asia and Africa at the time. Such an interpretation recognizes that the inability of Constantinople to maintain the territorial integrity of the empire largely created the political instability that caused WWI in the first place. As the Ottoman legacy slowly slipped into decline, the surrounding states faced the Eastern Question—who would inherit the real estate left behind?

Russia strongly supported Balkan nationalism due to desire for access to the Mediterranean and also because of its defense of pan-Slavism. Austria-Hungary, on the other hand, feared Balkan nationalism due to its own multiethnic composition.⁵⁶

The resulting struggle to acquire Ottoman lands (or to prevent a rival from doing so), largely created the strife that led to the First World War. So rather than view WWI as the cause of Ottoman demise, the facts on the ground reveal a more complex reality—the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire actually caused WWI.

We can look at the decline of the liberal international order in the same way. Rather than waiting and wondering which singular event will break American hegemony, we need to recognize that it is actually the slow decline of US power that is opening up political space for would be contenders. A future war may be the final nail in the coffin. However, just as with the Ottoman Empire, the war will not be the cause of American decline—it will be the result of it.

RUSSIA

Russia began as a small group of people in the Mongol Empire on the Eurasian plain.⁵⁷ Emerging as an independent state in the fifteenth century, Russia found itself a victim of its geography. Lacking natural defenses, Russia has been the victim of countless invasions—primarily from the steppes to the east (the path that the Mongols used) and the North European Plain to the west (the route through which the Teutonic Knights, Napoleon and Hitler all entered Russia).

Russia's initial response (in the late 15th century) was to expand north and northeast to

create a defensive barrier against would be invaders (particularly the Mongols). Later in the mid-16th century, Ivan IV expanded Russian claims as far south as the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains—and as far east as the Urals. Finally, in the 18th century, Russia expanded westward into Ukraine and the Carpathian Mountains, extending its western border to the Baltic Sea.⁵⁸

Since both the Baltic Sea and the Arctic Ocean are frozen six months out of the year, the need for access to a warm-water port drove Russian expansion further south—this, of course, led to conflict with the Ottomans who historically controlled access to the Black Sea. By the nineteenth century Russia claimed full control. However, it still needed access to a warm-water port.⁵⁹

In order to access the Mediterranean, Russian ships needed to navigate the Turkish Straights. This is still largely the case today.⁶⁰ The Turkish Straits include the Dardanelles, the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara. This is the only maritime passage connecting the Black Sea with the Mediterranean Sea (by means of the Aegean). From the Mediterranean, Russian ships can access the Indian Ocean (via the Suez Canal) and the Atlantic (through the Straits of Gibraltar).

Competition for control of these waterways has been fierce. Following the Turkish War of Independence, the Lausanne Agreement (1923) demilitarized the Turkish Straits and allowed for the passage of foreign vessels.⁶¹ In the years leading up to WWII, Turkey became concerned about its security. The Montreux Agreement (1936) restored Turkish sovereignty over the straits.⁶²

During WWI, Russia hoped to acquire Constantinople and control of the Straits. In fact, Britain and France had secretly promised to give Constantinople and the Straits to Russia as spoils of war.⁶³ Had it not been for the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia might well have acquired its long-coveted prize. British and French disingenuousness aside, Lenin formally acknowledged the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, and subsequently relinquished any and all claims to the Straits.⁶⁴

Stalin obviously felt differently—constantly asserting Soviet claims to the Straits, and even considering taking them by force and establishing a Soviet military base to protect them.⁶⁵

Superpowers, Hyperpowers and Uberpowers

Politics being what it is, on a dark October evening in 1944, Churchill met with Stalin in the Kremlin and secretly agreed to the post-war division of the Balkans. Stalin also insisted on a modification of the Montreux Agreement that allowed Soviet warships to pass through the Straits in times of both war and peace.⁶⁶ When Churchill informed FDR about Stalin's demand, Roosevelt was opposed to making any major revisions to the Montreux Agreement and decided to ignore the issue—hoping it would not come up again. But Stalin pressed the matter again at the Yalta Conference in February 1945.

On the one hand, Stalin had a legitimate concern. The Montreux Agreement gave Turkey the authority to close the Straits in either the event of war or *the threat of war*. Russia exported seventy-five percent of its grain through the Straits via the Black Sea. Since grain represented roughly 40 per cent of Russia's total export trade, the Straits were both militarily strategic and vital to Russia's growing economy.⁶⁷ This put the economic future of the Soviet Union in Turkish control. On the other hand, British concerns over possible Soviet occupation of the Suez Canal were also legitimate.⁶⁸

Following the end of the WWII, Moscow again pressured Turkey to allow Soviet ships to pass through the Straits. When the Turkish government refused, Stalin responded with a naval show of force—culminating in the Truman Doctrine and Turkey's application to join NATO.⁶⁹

Russia continued to expand eastward and southward—gobbling up the former territories of the Turks, Mongols and Tartars of Central Asia—until military overstretch and economic exhaustion caused the Soviet Union to collapse, leaving a myriad of independent republics in its wake. The Montreux Agreement continues to govern passage through the Turkish Straits—a point that was driven home in 2008 when Turkey denied passage to US warships following the South Ossetia War.

EUROPE

After the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 CE, a number of Germanic tribes competed for control. The Franks were among the Germanic peoples that began to attack the Roman Empire around 257 CE. The Franks consisted of two main divisions, the Salians and the Ripuarians. The Salians, who settled in modern-day Netherlands near the North Sea, were

exceptional sailors and fierce naval combatants. The Ripuarians settled along the Rhine in modern-day Northwest Germany. They were expert in land warfare.⁷⁰

The history of the Franks is typically divided into the Merovingian Period (481—751 CE) and the Carolingian Period (751—987 CE). Clovis I (466—511 CE) eventually consolidated Merovingian control over northern Gaul and the central region of the Rhine river valley. Roughly two centuries later, Charles Martel (688—741 CE) managed to consolidate Carolingian power. Martel was succeeded by his son Pepin in 751 CE, and later by his grandson, Charlemagne in 768 CE.⁷¹ Pepin and Charlemagne vastly expanded the Kingdom of the Franks to include the territory of modern-day France, Germany and the former Papal lands of Northern Italy.⁷²

We tend to think of concepts such as nationalism, sovereignty and territoriality as synonymous with the modern nation-state. In fact, the Westphalian nation-state system has become so ingrained in our minds that—like a fish in water—it's difficult for most people today to imagine any political order other than the current one. But this was not always the case. Medieval Europeans tended to identify with a variety of smaller institutions such as their local church parish, their city—or if they were a craftsman—their guild. These local institutions, in turn, belonged to larger organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Hapsburg Empire or the Hanseatic League.⁷³

The quest for hegemony in Catholic Europe presented itself via the doctrine of Universality—a medieval concept that essentially modeled global governance after the pattern in heaven. It was a trinity of sorts, with one God in heaven, one emperor to rule the world and one pope to rule the Church. Universality attempted to harness the power of the Roman Empire via the Roman Catholic Church, and for a time it did just that.⁷⁴

The Holy Roman Empire (800—1806 CE) reigned over portions of Western and Central Europe for ten centuries before it was dissolved by the Napoleonic wars.⁷⁵ Even still, it wasn't until the Hapsburg Emperor, Charles V, ascended the throne in 1519 that the universal claims of the Holy Roman Empire could be realized. Under Charles V, imperial authority extended across a vast Central European realm including modern-day Belgium, France, the

Netherlands, Germany, Northern Italy, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.⁷⁶

The Reformation, sparked by Martin Luther in 1519, created a religious schism between Catholics and Protestants. Without universal agreement regarding the one true church, there could be no one monarch or pope to represent all of Christianity. Once Protestant princes broke with the concept of religious homogeneity, they challenged the concept of universality as a whole and no longer saw allegiance to the emperor as a religious or political duty.⁷⁷

Ferdinand II (1578—1637), Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, attempted to extend Hapsburg imperial control over all of Central Europe, enforce Catholic universality and put down the Protestant princes. By 1618, much of the Holy Roman Empire was caught up in a religious civil war between the Catholics and the Protestants. What would eventually be known as the Thirty Years War raged on until 1648, leaving Central Europe devastated.⁷⁸

With the age-old global order in question, the emerging European states needed a new principal by which to regulate international relations. They found it in *raison d'etat* and the balance of power system, which emerged from the ashes of universality. *Raison d'etat* replaced the morality of universality with the national interest. Basically, rather than pledge allegiance to a monarch with universal authority, each state would pursue its own selfish interests. The first state to take the lead in this new order was France.

Ironically, the main architect of France's new strategic approach was Armand Jean du Plessis (aka Cardinal de Richelieu), the first Minister of France (1624—1642) and also a cardinal of the Catholic Church. Richelieu served as Chief Minister under Louis XIII (the father of Louis XIV—the Sun King), and he was tasked with overseeing French foreign policy.⁷⁹

Richelieu is noted for being among the first European diplomats to prioritize national interests over religious or dynastic preferences. Rising to power at the height of the Thirty Years War, Richelieu quickly realized that a strong Holy Roman Empire posed a grave geopolitical threat to France (which was literally surrounded by Catholic Hapsburg lands).⁸⁰

Louis XIII was both the king of France (1610—1643) and—as Louis II (1610—1620)—he was the king of Navarre (a Spanish Hapsburg

kingdom). Louis XIII was also married to Anne of Austria; the daughter of Philip III of Spain. Philip III was both the grandson of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II and husband to Margaret of Austria; the Holy Roman Emperor's sister.⁸¹

Pretty much the entire ruling class of Catholic Europe at that time was a tangled incestuous web of Hapsburg royalty. Nevertheless, Richelieu entered into an alliance with the Protestant princes, and France fought against the Holy Roman Empire in the Thirty Year's War. By aligning French forces with the Protestant princes of Germany and Sweden, Richelieu managed to weaken the Holy Roman Empire and obtain his main objective—establish France as the dominant European power. In the centuries that followed, European empires would rise and fall in the name of national interest.

The 1789 French Revolution started a fire that threatened to consume all of Europe in revolutionary fervor. The conflagration lasted until 1815 and engulfed nearly the entire continent. By 1792, France's newly-formed Legislative Assembly initiated what it thought would be a quick and decisive war against Austria (famous last words). Louis XVI (1774—1792)—the last Bourbon king of France—and his wife, Marie-Antoinette (Austrian archduchess and daughter of Holy Roman Emperor, Francis I) were executed for treason in 1793.⁸²

France fought five separate coalitions that allied against it: the Third Coalition (1803—1806),⁸³ the Fourth Coalition (1806—1807),⁸⁴ the Fifth Coalition (1809),⁸⁵ the Sixth Coalition (1813)⁸⁶ and the Seventh Coalition (1815).⁸⁷ Some refer to the Napoleonic Wars as the first world war because they claimed a combined total of over two million lives and ushered in the congress system—the first alliance system of its kind in Europe.⁸⁸

Following Napoleon's defeat, the powers that successfully balanced against him met regularly with the goal of preventing any future revisionist state from trying to dominate Europe again. After the congress system failed to prevent Germany from making two unsuccessful attempts at hegemony, the League of Nations (and later, the United Nations) picked up the torch to discourage domination of the continent by any one power.

Superpowers, Hyperpowers and Uberpowers

Many attribute the carnage of WWI to the secret treaties and cobweb of alliances so typical of the old diplomacy that prevailed during the century that preceded it. Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations was a decided effort to achieve peace via supranational means by replacing the old system with a new form of diplomacy centered around the concept of collective security. The Treaty of Versailles included a provision for the League to serve as a mechanism to enforce collective security.⁸⁹

The Treaty of Versailles was a miserable failure, as WWII quickly demonstrated. Even though Wilson personally negotiated the terms, the US Senate denied consent to the Treaty by a vote of 39 to 55. It wasn't until 1921 that the US signed the US-German Peace Treaty.⁹⁰

Wilson's dream of collective security did eventually come to fruition with the establishment of the United Nations. The reason most often cited as the cause of the League's failure was a lack of centralized power. Therefore, the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) were specifically invested with the power to veto resolutions passed by the General Assembly. More importantly, Chapter VII of the UN Charter grants the UNSC exclusive authority to "determine the existence of any threat to the peace" and to "make recommendations or decide what measures shall be taken... to maintain or restore international peace and security."⁹¹

In the initial years following WWII, Europe was entirely dependent on US economic and military assistance. The bipolar structure of the Cold War—and the American nuclear guarantee—resulted in a European withdrawal from most military decision-making. But the costs of empire are extensive.

America's total share of world GDP dropped from about 50% in 1945 to 35% in 1969.⁹² Meanwhile, the European share of total GDP was rising. As the European continent slowly recovered from the two world wars, US economic assistance to the region naturally tapered off. By 1960, US economic aid to Europe was a thing of the past, and military assistance also began to decline. By the mid-1970s, the population of the European Community exceeded that of the United States and Europe's productive capacity roughly equaled that of the US.

As European unity grew stronger, Europe became more independent regarding economic and trade matters. Eventually, the US began to lose political influence on the continent as well. The entire relationship was going through transition. Ironically, just as the American colonies once demanded representation in the British Parliament, as Europe prospered, the Europeans demanded more representation in American decision-making as it affected international affairs.

However, the American argument was that Europe continued to prosper precisely *because* of the protection it enjoyed under America's military umbrella (which US taxpayers provided). Therefore, Washington's response was that if Europe's wealth entitled it to greater influence, it should also require it to bear a larger share of the burden. This same argument remains at the heart of US-EU relations today.

For the past 75 years, European security has been largely divorced from European diplomacy.⁹³ Particularly since the demise of the Soviet Union, a new style of conference diplomacy replaced the older form of congress diplomacy, resulting in an increased number of technocrats supplanting the previous cohort of professional diplomats. Environmental issues and trade negotiations superseded Europe's centuries-old preoccupation with conquest and domination (e.g., Spain in the sixteenth century, Austria in the seventeenth century, France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Germany in the twentieth century). Ironically, the home of collective security's greatest advocate would also be the next state to attempt to take over the world—and this one would succeed.

THE UNITED STATES

The story of American expansion is far from glamorous. After nearly exterminating the local inhabitants of the land, European settlers occupied the continent all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Pacification of the land meant killing Native Americans and putting up fences to protect their rightfully stolen property. Pacification also meant planting crops, but the new American farmers needed fertilizer. While American forces had been engaging foreign militaries since the war for independence,⁹⁴ US imperialism beyond the continent actually began with a quest for fecal matter. Between 1867 and 1903, the US annexed the Guano Islands—94 islands covered in bird droppings.⁹⁵

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Another immensely important factor influencing the decisions of American states men at the time involved European colonialism. The infamous Berlin West Africa Conference (1884—1885) established the ground rules for how the European powers would divide up Africa.⁹⁶ A decade later, the partition of China was on the table for discussion.⁹⁷ What if the Caribbean and Central America were next?

Mahan's 1890 release, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660—1783*, definitely made its impact on US foreign policy.⁹⁸ However, policy-makers had been wrestling with the threat of European expansion into the western hemisphere since at least a decade earlier.⁹⁹ The planned construction of the Panama Canal invited apprehension over the possibility of it falling under the control of a strategic competitor.¹⁰⁰

Of particular concern was the island of Cuba. The Spanish colony was in a nearly constant state of rebellion, and it offered the temptation of low-hanging fruit to any European power strong enough to snatch it out of Spain's weakening clutch. Rather than allow such a scenario to unfold, the US intervened. The Spanish-American War (1898) can be viewed as an early example of US imperial expansion or it can be looked upon as primarily defensive in nature. While both positions are technically accurate, we cannot ignore the fact that Washington also acquired the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam; occupied Cuba; and annexed Hawaii and American Samoa.¹⁰¹

Still, it's necessary to put all of this in its proper historical context. It wasn't until 1893 that the British Empire considered the United States important enough to merit an embassy. Prior to that time, the US was very much on the periphery of international affairs—but this was about to change.

The Spanish-American War (1898) was just the opening current. America was about to assume its position centerstage. In 1903, Theodore Roosevelt introduced his Big Stick approach to US foreign policy—essentially stating that America would protect its interests abroad—a policy Roosevelt upheld by stationing US Marines in Panama that same year.¹⁰² The 1904 Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine announced that the US would intervene in any conflicts arising between a European power and a Latin American state.¹⁰³ In 1905, Roosevelt hosted a peace conference in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, mediating the end of the Russo-

Japanese War.¹⁰⁴ A year later, the US participated in the Moroccan conference in Algeiras.¹⁰⁵ By 1917, the US had assumed center-stage in global politics.¹⁰⁶ A year later, US President Woodrow Wilson bilaterally negotiated peace with Germany. Think about this. Just twenty-five years earlier, the United States of America had just been awarded an embassy by the leading hegemon. Now, it was deciding Britain's fate. America was in the early stages of its meteoric rise—and it was soon to engage in its subsequent fall.

In 1938 the United States spent roughly \$1 billion on defense, it had no formal military alliances, and it only stationed troops on territory it controlled. Twelve years later, the US defense budget exceeded \$50 billion with American troops stationed at 450 bases in thirty-six countries around the world.¹⁰⁷

By 1945 the US dollar had replaced the British pound as the international reserve currency, and the United States claimed a full 50% of world GDP. This is absolutely astounding! In roughly fifty years, the US rose from a back-water state to a global superpower. The comparisons with China over the last four decades simply cannot go unnoticed.

It has been roughly forty years since the United States established diplomatic relations with China. In those four decades, China has grown no less spectacularly than the US did—and the writing is on the wall. China is assuming its place in the center of the global system, with or without US approval.

We have all heard of the golden rule—whoever owns the gold makes the rules—and in 1945, the United States held the largest share of gold. Not surprisingly, the US rolled out an economic system based upon its own political and ideological foundations—and one that represented its own unique geopolitical interests.

At the heart of this new world order, a network of international organizations dictated how the world would be governed. Policies regarding everything—from the conduct of war to the most banal details of peace, trade and currency exchange—were imposed upon the member states of the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which became the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995.

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Washington employed its superior air and naval power, backed by its nuclear advantage, to police the global commons and thereby ensure the safe transport of goods and services. Meanwhile, Wall Street imposed its own unique brand of economic policies across the globe to remove any and all barriers to the US-led capitalist world order.

Contrary to popular belief, this new world order was not based upon free-market capitalism. Quite the contrary, it replaced the free-market capitalism of the previous era with a brand of state capitalism never before seen—a kind of democratic fascism that naturally emerged from the totalitarian chaos of the Second World War.

This new order favored US corporate interests in every way, and US economic assistance was never given without substantial strings attached. In Europe, French regional trading blocs were dampened to allow greater American access to French markets. Likewise, the British were forced to make the pound convertible with the dollar and to remove restrictions on US imports.¹⁰⁸ Beyond Western Europe, American state capitalism voraciously preyed upon vulnerable populations.

The average observer would really have to try hard to miss the blatant hypocrisy in American foreign policy over the past 75 years. The United States promoted democracy and human rights—via dollar diplomacy and membership in American-controlled international organizations—everywhere that US corporate interests required. But democracy and human rights were never important considerations in and of themselves. Instead, they were always just a means to an end. As long as US corporate interests remained unimpeded, a state's domestic politics and human rights record were non-issues. But whenever American commercial interests were threatened, such threats were removed without the slightest hesitation—regardless of the state's domestic politics or human rights record.

I could offer many examples to substantiate this point, such as when the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh decided to nationalize Iran's oil. The CIA (with the cooperation of the British Secret Intelligence Service) orchestrated a coup to overthrow Mosaddegh and install the puppet regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1953.¹⁰⁹

Another example occurred in 1954—on the other side of the world. The Eisenhower

Administration overthrew Guatemala's democratically elected president, Jacobo Árbenz, and replaced him with a military dictator, Carlos Castillo Armas. What was Árbenz's crime? Land reforms granting property to peasants and labor laws that protected the poor.

Why should the United States care about land reforms and labor laws in Guatemala in 1954? While it's true that a few of Árbenz's advisors were a little more left of center than US Cold War foreign policy might have preferred, this was not the main issue. A little digging reveals that both John Foster Dulles (U.S. Secretary of State) and Allen Dulles (Director of Central Intelligence) had considerable economic interests in the United Fruit Company which suffered substantial losses due to Árbenz's land reform policies.¹¹⁰ So, the Eisenhower Administration used the threat of communism to replace a democratically elected government with that of a brutal dictator. So much for democracy and human rights.

Ironically, it was in the states where American neoliberal economic policies were imposed that people suffered the most egregious form of human rights violation—unnecessarily imposed abject poverty. The World Bank (WB) offered hundreds of millions of dollars in development loans to impoverished countries—money that would literally go directly back into the industrial elite's pockets as they secured the construction contracts. These development projects almost never benefitted the local population. Rather, the loans were used to build infrastructure necessary for commerce and industry so that American corporations could operate there. Worse yet, these projects often displaced thousands or more in the name of progress. Nonetheless, the debt burden for these projects was placed squarely upon the shoulders of those displaced, as well as on their children.

Likewise, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stabilized currency exchange rates—making international commerce volatile for American corporations. Meanwhile, the UN outlawed war and the WTO outlawed trade wars—both making the world a safer place for US state capitalism.

Like pieces on a chess board, each organization had its own unique role to play in securing the American world order. The UN stripped member-states of the power to declare war, the WTO eroded much of their power to impose trade barriers against American corporations, and the two lending organizations (WB and

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IMF) imposed strict limitations upon recipient governments—eventually insisting that they become neoliberal democracies and privatize the majority of their public sectors.

In order to receive much-needed loans, governments around the world were forced—not only to democratize—but also to privatize many of the public goods and services that had previously been provided freely or at discounted prices by the state. Privatization equated to enormous profits for American corporations as private schools, hospitals and banks sprung up overnight. Meanwhile subsidized food, fuel, education, and medical services—along with many other necessities—disappeared from sight, leaving billions to languish in unmitigated suffering.

Ironically, privatization has been equally as devastating to the United States. Private shareholders of international corporations (who may or may not even be American citizens) prioritize profit over civic responsibility. Therefore, corporate board members find themselves under enormous pressure to produce acceptable quarterly reports at basically any cost.

SECOND WIND OR LAST GASP OF BREATH?

Many are debating the current trajectory of the American empire. Is decline (like death and taxes) inevitable? I think the answer to this question lies within the question itself. Some may have successfully cheated the government, but I do not know of anyone who has managed to cheat death—empires included. Death is simply a part of life (at least for now). Still, like the Steven Pinkers of the world who would have us believe that life is somehow different today, there are also those who have convinced themselves that the US can somehow avoid the fate of every other empire that has come before it.

The 1980s witnessed a shift in economic policy. Many governments abandoned their commitment to full employment and pursued a new model of economic growth. Rather than allowing wages to drive demand as they had done under the Keynesian approach, the new model substituted increasing amounts of debt and asset price inflation to drive consumption. Full employment and minimum wages were now treated as the causes of inflation, and therefore, as the enemy.

For more than seven decades, the United States has been able to leverage the dollar in a way that

allows it to borrow heavily from other countries. Massive debt has afforded the US the ability to live far beyond its means, for a time—and during that time, America has converted itself into a national security state.

We have to ask ourselves why it is that no one has yet attempted to balance against the United States. In the three decades since the end of the Cold War, neither China, Japan, India Russia nor the EU have challenged the US-led international order. But then again, why would they? As long as the US provides the public goods that allow other states in the system to thrive, how would balancing advance their interests?¹¹¹ Still, how long can this arrangement last?

The 2007-8 debt crisis was a game-changer in many respects. The resulting Great Recession had a detrimental impact on several European countries. The European sovereign debt crisis began in Iceland with the collapse of its banking system in 2008. It then spread to the continent where Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain (PIGS), all faced serious economic realities.¹¹²

Investor confidence plummeted, and lenders began to demand higher interest rates which only further devastated these cash-strapped economies. Other European states began to fear for the fate of the Euro itself, and so certain measures were incorporated to minimize the damage with financial guarantees. These guarantees were contingent upon the recipient countries agreeing to adhere to strict measures of austerity. Meanwhile, rating agencies downgraded the debts—to junk status in some cases.¹¹³

Many economists trace the European sovereign debt crisis back to the US housing bubble and American overreliance on inflated asset prices to fuel demand. Even though the world has somehow managed to dodge the bullet, at some point, America's rising debt will negatively impact investor confidence to the point that the US will no longer be able to borrow to meet its needs. When this happens, its ability to patrol the oceans, safeguard the commons, manage conflict and maintain a functioning reserve currency will be compromised. This has happened to countless empires in the past.

In the sixteenth century, the Spanish monarchy was so far in debt that at one point the interest payments alone exceeded its normal revenue.¹¹⁴ France found itself in similarly dire economic circumstances on the eve of the French

Revolution, as did the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century and Great Britain in the twentieth.¹¹⁵

Within a decade or so of the Yalta Conference (where Winston Churchill met with FDR and Stalin to decide the fate of war-torn Europe), Great Britain lost much of its imperial possessions.¹¹⁶ A similar (if not quite so rapid) decline has been taking place in the United States since it began having balance of payments problems in the 1960s.¹¹⁷ Balance of trade problems followed in the 1970s and by the 1980s, the US had become a net debtor country.¹¹⁸

Today, America is facing a new challenge—China. China's ability to attract western manufacturing has afforded it the opportunity to prosper at the average American worker's expense. Lost American jobs equate to social mobility for Chinese workers and profitable quarterly returns for transnational corporations operating in the People's Republic. This arrangement has a geopolitical aspect to it as well. Not only has industrialization made China an economic powerhouse, but the de-industrialization of the western powers has also significantly diminished their tax bases, and therefore, their economic and military footprint as well.

Enter Donald Trump and his campaign promises to impose tariffs against China—which he subsequently made good on beginning in 2018. Trump increased tariffs by 25% on some \$250 billion in imports from China. The net result is decreased bilateral trade which—no matter how you package it—is bad news for both players.¹¹⁹

The “tech war” is proving to be much more damaging to China, at least for the moment, as China currently spends more to import semiconductor chips than it does to import oil. However, Beijing is working its way around this obstacle as well. Its “Made in China 2025” received a huge impetus when the US began to blacklist Chinese firms from purchasing US-made semiconductors. Chinese tech firms such as Huawei and Alibaba are rising to the occasion by producing their own A.I.-powered chips.¹²⁰ The Trump administration did not limit its efforts to trade, however.

In 2016, Trump also pledged to increase the size of the navy to 350 ships.¹²¹ At the time, the two big questions on everyone's mind was, why do we need the additional ships and how will we pay for them? The US 2017 National Security

Strategy (NSS) answered the first question, and the 2019 Navy Force Structure report answered the second.¹²² “Every year, competitors such as China steal U.S. intellectual property valued at hundreds of billions of dollars.”¹²³ Trump made it clear that his administration views the threat to America's technological advantage as a national security threat, and that the US will treat it as such. “America's competitors weaponize information to attack the values and institutions that underpin free societies, while shielding themselves from outside information.”¹²⁴ The 2017 NSS establishes in no uncertain terms that the Trump administration was prepared “to protect Americans against sophisticated challenges to national security.”¹²⁵ The Biden administration's position on this issue remains to be seen.

Those who think that US hegemony will last forever and ever are in for a very abrupt surprise. Just as Great Britain declined in less than a quarter of a century, we can expect to see a major global power shift during our own lifetimes. I sincerely hope that the US will possess the wisdom and grace to pass the baton peacefully as Great Britain chose to do.

America's current relationship with China very much appears to be that of a scorned codependent partner, lashing out against a former lover that has moved on.¹²⁶ China is evolving beyond export-led growth—and hence its dependence upon the United States' consumer market—and it is transitioning into an economy based upon consumer-led growth.¹²⁷ What does this transition equate to for the United States? The ramifications are multiple.

First and foremost, China's transition to consumer-led growth naturally increases its debt to GDP ratio—leaving less discretionary income to invest in US treasury instruments.¹²⁸ As Chinese household consumption increases, savings will decline. On the flip side of this coin, the US will have to find another international source for inexpensive loans.

Secondly, growing Chinese demand for affordable consumer products decreases the volume of inexpensive Chinese products available to American consumers. The consequences of these two realities alone (decreased investment in US treasuries and a shortage of affordable consumer products) are enough to severely hamper the US economy. But like most scorned ex-partners, the US is also engaging in self-destructive behavior that only makes the situation worse.

In 2019, the Trump administration increased tariffs by 25% on some \$250 billion in imports from China. Of course, China simply offset the impact of the tariffs by allowing its currency to weaken against the dollar and imposing its own tariffs. Rather than retaliating with tariffs, the United States should be focused upon its own export-driven growth and actively smoothing its trade relations with China. Unfortunately, even after the promised US-China trade deal signed in January 2020, the US continues to impose more than \$300 billion in tariffs on Chinese imports.¹²⁹

One has to question the wisdom of this policy given that even many of America's traditional allies are developing stronger economic and diplomatic ties with China—it's simply offering them a better deal. John F. Kennedy's famous prediction appears to be coming true: "if the United States were to falter, the whole world ... would inevitably begin to move toward the Communist bloc."¹³⁰ It's the classic bandwagoning for gain scenario.

As Randall Schweller maintains: "balancing is driven by the desire to avoid losses; bandwagoning by the opportunity for gain. The presence of a significant external threat, while required for effective balancing, is unnecessary for states to bandwagon."¹³¹ In other words, China doesn't have to pose a threat in order for other states to ally with it. Economic realities play just as large a role in multilateral alliances as geopolitical considerations—which is exactly why states are not currently bandwagoning with the United States despite its superior military and aggressive unilateral posture. As George Kennan stated in 1947, "a given proportion of the adherents to the [communist] movement are drawn to it . . . primarily by the belief that it is the coming thing, the movement of the future . . . and that those who hope to survive—let alone to thrive—in the coming days will be those who have the foresight to climb on the bandwagon."¹³²

Obviously, neither JFK nor Kennan had crystal balls. They were responding to the Soviet-style communism of their day. However, their observations are no less salient—states will bandwagon for gain, whether it be economic, environmental, developmental or otherwise. Meanwhile, China has been busy playing a real-life version of Monopoly—patiently and methodically buying up all of the real estate on the board and beating the West at its own game.

However, the main problem facing the United States today is not merely financial. While the US still possesses global power, it lacks universal legitimacy. If we go back to the idea of universality, the Holy Roman Empire enjoyed legitimacy as the political head of the universal (Catholic) church. Its downfall was not the result of military or economic ruin (although these definitely played a factor). Rather, the Holy Roman Empire ultimately failed because an opposing ideology (Protestantism) robbed it of its universal legitimacy over Christian Europe.¹³³

America faces the same problem today. The US possesses the military and economic might to exercise political control over the entire globe, but it is still acting according to a purely nationalist agenda. The problems facing the world today are borderless, and the world requires a leader that possesses all of America's hard power combined with the legitimacy of a truly universal state. The only way that any one power can possess universal legitimacy today is if it convinces the international community that it has solutions for the many problems facing the world. Such a power would be more than a superpower, or even a hyperpower—it would be an uberpowers. No more nation-states in the traditional Westphalian sense of the word, no more great power politics—no more nationalism at all—and hence, no more war. The emergence of such a world would first require the demise of the current international order.

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