

“America’s ‘exceptionalism’—its hope of defeating the cycles of history—hinges on using power now to permanently change the rules of the geopolitical game in everyone’s favor, including America’s own.”

The Counsel of Geopolitics

PARAG KHANNA

During the cold war, geopolitics was synonymous with the US-Soviet struggle for global primacy. But what does geopolitics mean today for our “unipolar moment”? America’s overwhelming power inspires outpourings of both self-satisfaction and angst. This national ambivalence should surprise no one, for America’s near omnipotence represents equal parts blessing and curse: to enjoy it too easily would be to forget that centuries of history recount—and predict—not just the rise but the fall of great powers. Indeed, if America has reached the apogee of its power, can it go anywhere but downhill from here? Although its expeditious victory in Iraq provoked claims that rumors of America’s demise are greatly exaggerated, history demonstrates that aggressive unilateralism only accelerates the inevitable.

“The first and last geopolitical truth is that states pursue security by pursuing power,” wrote Michael Glennon recently in *Foreign Affairs*. That truism indeed reflects the geopolitics of all empires past. As the United States extends itself around the world in the name of security—the military is currently active in more than 100 countries—it also falls into the oldest geopolitical trap: imperial overstretch. America may have conquered its geopolitical rivals for now, but averting the fate of empires past will require the defeat of geopolitics itself.

GEOPOLITICS 101

From a beginning that saw it cast as a pseudoscience and the intellectual foundation for Nazi power projection, the field of geopolitics has matured into an analytic synthesis of the past and a prognostic window into the future offering lessons that current policymakers ignore at their peril. One

could describe geopolitics as the climatology of international relations, a deep science that uncovers historical cycles and patterns. Since 1982, Charles Pirtle has taught at Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, where his students view him—and his course, “Geopolitics”—as both menacing and prophetic. Pirtle’s definitions of geopolitics combine the seemingly impersonal forces of geography, environment, economics, and technology with the deeply personal thrusts of human interest and political will. He grins while pointing out that the timeless relevance of the field means that geopolitical scholars, unlike Sovietologists, will never have to apply for jobs in history departments.

Pirtle begins his course with the best-known theory associated with geopolitics, Robert Gilpin’s “hegemonic stability theory,” which claims that the international system is most stable when there is one dominant power. Over the past thousand years, the mantle of “leading power” has passed steadily westward from the Chinese Song dynasty in the twelfth century to Genghis Khan’s Mongol empire, then to the Islamic Mughal dynasty, followed by the Ottomans. Among European great powers, Spain’s sixteenth-century monarchy colonized the New World, the seventeenth-century Dutch naval juggernaut ruled world trade, Napoleon’s France stretched to Moscow, and throughout the nineteenth century the sun never set on Great Britain’s imperium. The twentieth century, of course, brought another westward shift in the locus of global power across the Atlantic to the United States.

Although the United States fulfills the role of hegemon today, it is not too early to speculate whether the inexorable movement of might westward will once again see China as the world’s leading power. Indeed, the evolving story of China’s growing power is the current incarnation of geopol-

PARAG KHANNA is an adviser on global issues to the *World Economic Forum* and senior research analyst for the forum’s *Global Governance Initiative* at the *Brookings Institution*.

itics. China had already become in the 1990s a growing concern. Numerous magazine covers envisioned a “new cold war” with the next “evil empire.” A controversial Pentagon strategy memo leaked to *The New York Times* pointedly invoked the overarching priority of preventing any great power rivals from emerging. On coming to office, President George W. Bush wasted little time in labeling China “a strategic competitor,” a designation that might promote a self-fulfilling prophecy.

BETWEEN CORE AND PERIPHERY

Dipping back into another relevant school of geopolitical thought, Immanuel Wallerstein’s “world-system theory” argues that the alternative approach to China—a so-called constructive engagement policy of democracy promotion, increased investment, and economic liberalization—will only expedite China’s path to great power status. This prediction flows from a second law of geopolitics: the inevitability of the spread of knowledge and technology between the “core” and “periphery.” In other words, globalization itself represents but the acceleration of the world-system phenomenon—bringing, for example, computers and the Internet from America just as it brought printing and gunpowder from China almost 1,000 years ago.

Over time, world-system theory explains, some countries of the periphery will become empowered to climb into the ranks of the core—moving from exploited to exploiting. The relevant corollary, however, holds that as core powers decay, some of them will slip into the periphery. The once mighty Russia, for instance, now is commonly dismissed as “Chad with nuclear weapons.” As China builds rail networks to connect with Central Asia, and its population stresses the northern border with Russia (currently suffering an astounding population freefall), one can imagine China eventually controlling what the British geographer Halford Mackinder called the “geographic pivot of history”—the heartland of the Eurasian “world island.”

Within the family of geopolitical theories, methodological strife is set aside for a third common axiom, the “law of unequal growth.” It says that the faster economic growth of the hegemon’s competitors will diminish the hegemon’s edge over its rivals over time, causing unipolar stability to degenerate into power disequilibrium. This is where A. F. K. Organski’s “power transition theory” comes into play. Already in the 1960s, geopoliticians recognized China’s astonishing power potential as it began to move through the industrial development process.

Current trends suggest that the Chinese economy, measured in terms of purchasing power parity, will become as large as the American economy by 2025. Organski’s theory predicts that, depending on the rate of the challenger state’s power maturation and the degree of friendship between the challenger and the leading state, both sides can prudently avert conflict. Great Britain, for instance, passed the torch after World War I to the vastly more powerful United States in light of their “special relationship.” In our own time, however, China’s aggregation of land-based power eventually will allow it to deny the United States unfettered command of East Asia’s coasts—meaning a showdown over Taiwan, for example, could spark a vast regional conflict.

The next geopolitical apotheosis—involving both the “declining hegemon” America and the “rising regional power” China—is expected between 2025 and 2050. But not only China hawks worry about America’s eventual decline from global hegemony. It is worth remembering that 10 years ago, Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations?” appeared, arguing that from arms sales and oil pipelines to voting patterns in the United Nations, a Sino-Islamic axis is materializing, heralding America’s fall from post-cold war glory. Indeed, to many Americans, on September 11, 2001, fundamentalist Islam became another China literally overnight, a second colossal (and monolithic) menace to national security. The terrorists’ ability to lethally strike the homeland, even from within, symbolized to America’s enemies a vulnerability of empire to be ruthlessly exploited. Citing both radical Islam (boosted by a Muslim population explosion) and the reawakening Chinese dragon, some conservatives fear that America, like Rome, will be brought down by a combination of hegemonic rivals and technologically empowered terrorists—the new “barbarians” of our age.

Islam is not a geopolitical entity, however, and thus not a great power rival. And although geopolitics tells us that China, India, and perhaps other states will eventually become great powers, it does not teach that World War III several decades from now must inevitably follow. The lessons of geopolitics are intended to challenge historians and political scientists to produce an alternative roadmap that can guide decision makers today, not justify military buildups and preemptive strikes. Even as Pirtle teaches about centuries of historical cycles, he imbues his students with a concern for how American leaders will manage the fact that no empire stays on top forever, and he defies them to thwart the inevitable. On the final day of the

course he thunders, "What will *you* do to prevent this from happening?"

ROME REDUX?

Fortunately, America will, for the foreseeable future, shape the rules of world order. Reflecting the sturdiness of America's empire for now, statistics show that the United States spends more on its military than the rest of the world combined, and that America's share of the global economy remains almost one-quarter of the total. Other imperial trappings abound, with the State of the Union address watched and debated around the world, foreign leaders testifying before the Senate, English becoming the dominant language of global communication, and US leadership expected in helping to resolve far-flung disputes.

Yet, despite all this, Americans truly feel their empire is exceptional: unlike the Romans and British, "We don't *do* conquest." The continuing military occupation of Iraq notwithstanding, historian Niall Ferguson has neatly summed up the US public's stance on imperialism as, "Can we, like, go home now?" Comparing America with his native Britain in the book *Empire*, he asserts that America considers itself at most an "empire by invitation." Indeed, the United States prefers free-trade agreements to mercantilism, has no desire to colonize the Middle East, and does not plan to relocate the Prime Meridian to pass through New York. Nevertheless, even the most benign of intentions cannot guarantee that America will escape the fate of Rome, especially in the face of deep and growing resentment abroad. As Americans skirmish on the frontiers of empire, they, like the Romans, seem to have willed peace and prepared for war—*Si vis pacem, para bellum*—yet have only seen the latter.

Is the United States itself to blame? A recent sampling of global opinion sums up the answer: no other country in the world likes America's rules. Former South African President Nelson Mandela said a year ago that "the attitude of the United States is a threat to world peace." In May 1999 the Oxford Union submitted this proposition for debate: "Resolved: The United States is a Rogue State." It seems that most people honestly believe the United States wants wars. In a recent BBC survey, only 25 percent of those polled felt that American military power had a positive impact on the world. The geostrategist Edward Luttwak once remarked that "madness is rare only among individuals; it is quite common in entire nations." Internationally, there is little faith that America will avoid, in a

paroxysm of self-righteous madness, plunging the globe into World War III, the first shots of which many believe were fired in Iraq.

According to global poll results, the stakes when it comes to US actions in Iraq or North Korea today involve nothing less than the future international order itself. As America crusades to build world order, others believe America is bent on destroying it. Geopolitical theory defines world order as a "stable distribution of power around the world"; few globally find American hegemony particularly stable. In fact, 40 percent of Russians and French questioned in a Pew survey actually wanted the United States to lose the war in Iraq, dispelling the notion that opposition reflected merely polite disagreement among friends. As the only power with global reach, America's decisions and actions influence other nations' policies and world views. The choice is America's, however, as to whether this influence will be positive or negative, cooperative or conflictual. In its triumphalist hubris, the United States seems to have forgotten that empires are always resented.

IN SEARCH OF MONSTERS

No wonder, then, that America is frequently accused, in the words of John Quincy Adams, of "going abroad, in search of monsters to destroy," or continuously planning, in political scientist Andrew Bacevich's phrase, "Operation 'Insert Name Here' Freedom." Indeed, with Iraq occupied, the targeting of Iran, Syria, and Sudan for "regime change" may already have begun. There is something intellectually seductive, even idealistically appealing, about the notion that if we just "end states who sponsor terrorism," as Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz notoriously put it, the world would be free of existential threats and primed to embrace global cooperation. Yet, as Nietzsche cautioned, "He who would fight monsters must take care not to become one." It is precisely the pursuit of such a chimera that turns the United States into the existential threat it seeks to eradicate. And in a world already chaotic and dangerous, unilaterally applying the hammer of American power in the Middle East and elsewhere almost certainly guarantees the United States another decade of crisis after crisis. While neoconservatives wax philosophical about the benefits of American imperial benevolence, the rest of the world sees the spreading tentacles of exploitative hegemony, fueling resistance and "blowback."

A study earlier this year by the Center for Strategic and International Studies ranks "fear of Ameri-

can dominance” as the number one reason non-nuclear states seek nuclear weapons. The United States discarded the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and has made clear that it has no intention of ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Both actions indicate a desire to avoid any limits on either its offensive or defensive nuclear options. Whereas treaties provide disincentives for proliferation, America’s aggressive counterproliferation doctrine enshrined in the Bush administration’s *National Security Strategy* creates incentives to go brazenly nuclear.

This logic—call it “geopsychology”—reflects the simple, instinctively human suspicion of power. It is the cause of history’s arms races, but with a special irony for the United States. Now, even if all nine US naval supercarrier battle groups were to blockade Northeast Asia, an impoverished, cold war holdover like North Korea could still defy and deter the United States with its nuclear weapons. And it would do so claiming self-defense against American encroachment.

Without a greater balance between the uses of American power and how others perceive that power, we can expect America’s political bridge-

heads to continue to sink in the quicksand of the “multitude” of resistance to hegemony evoked by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their neo-Marxist manifesto *Empire*. For all the “soft power” the United States allegedly possesses, the world remains unconvinced that America really does not have imperial pretensions. And if soft power consists of deploying the forces of attraction over coercion, then the United States undercuts its soft power every time it deploys hard power. Meanwhile, other countries already practice “soft balancing,” pursuing diplomatic counterweights to overt American bullying. Recall that in 2001 the United States lost its seat on the United Nations Human Rights Committee while Sudan was voted onto the body.

It is ironic that America, the only country in the world with a round-the-clock need to communicate its policies to foreign populations, demonstrates such a large gap in its understanding of the rest of the world. US politicians purchase the power of masterful messaging for their own campaigns but deprive their diplomats of the training and resources necessary to interact with diverse and demanding audiences around the world. Visible rifts in the transatlantic alliance and within the UN

Security Council—over Iraq and global treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol on global warming and the International Criminal Court—underscore the growth of political constraints on America’s use of power, portending a broader clash among geopolitical world-views in coming years.

TOYNBEE’S ALTERNATIVE

This imperial hubris, together with the rising multitude of resistance it engenders from other great powers, fundamentalists, and global public opinion, seems like a replay of ancient geopolitical tragedy. History appears to be repeating itself admirably. The question is: Can America’s leaders prevent history from turning in its familiar circles—rise and decline, conflict and stalemate—and spur movement toward a collective, self-stabilizing future instead? Fortunately, mankind’s geopolitical evolution provides an alternative logic by which the United States could

trump history, indefinitely suspending great power rivalries and steering the geopolitical supertanker toward President Woodrow Wilson’s 1917 vision of “Not a balance of power, but a community of

power, not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace.”

The logic of geopolitical evolution underlying Wilson’s vision was first articulated by the British historian Arnold Toynbee, who sought to transcend the fatalistic geopolitics of Oswald Spengler’s famous *Decline of the West*. Spengler’s two-volume treatise opens with the bold pronouncement, “This book will attempt for the first time to predict history,” and goes on to argue that the weakening of a civilization automatically entails the waning—and ultimate disappearance—of its core values (*Kultur*). Toynbee’s 10-volume *Study of History* chronicled the extinction of more than a dozen civilizations. But, having witnessed the birth of both the nuclear age and the onset of the cold war, he recognized that this time around, not merely Western civilization, but “Civilization with a big C,” was imperiled. In his slender but sweeping 1948 book *Civilization on Trial*, Toynbee asserted that because the West was the first civilization to geographically unify the globe, the geopolitics of unlimited expansion had to be replaced with a new geopolitics for an integrated world. The cold war, rather than dividing the globe, united it in a common geopolitical fate. The

America, deprived of the powers of persuasion to impose itself on the rest of the world, will be forced to find ways to maximize the diminishing returns on its geopolitical influence.

transformative potential of Toynbee's evolutionary revelations lies in the imperative to break with an era when states could either expand through conquest or hermetically isolate themselves. Neither is possible today.

Anticipating a world in which nuclear weapons threaten everyone, where rich and poor alike rely on economic interdependence, and major world religions expand and overlap, Toynbee foresaw the need for *Weltinnenpolitik*—a “world domestic politics”—to redefine collective political geography toward the building of a universal community with a common understanding of security. Toynbee proposed a number of principles for governing an integrated world: constitutional, cooperative world government; compromises between free enterprise and socialism; and religious foundations for a secular superstructure. He urged consideration of a longer view, to examine how decisions made today affect not only current events but also future generations, inspiring caution, deliberation, and prudence.

Replacing Spengler's alarmism with foresight, and determinism with agency, Toynbee offered America a choice—an opportunity—that Rome did not have. According to his classic formulation of the stress and response theory, a society can choose either “adaptation” to an integrated world or a “fundamentalism” that remains inflexible to changing conditions. Whereas Spengler viewed decay as an organic force acting on all civilizations, Toynbee argued that, for the first time, civilizations could see the fate that history has in store for them, with the West “relegated to the modest place which is all that it can expect to retain in virtue of its intrinsic worth by comparison with those of other cultures.” Great powers, in other words, can adjust. Even though the West, with its liberal, pluralist beliefs, has already been far outpopulated by other civilizations, global wars are not inevitable simply because relative decline is.

MAXIMIZING DIMINISHING RETURNS

Today, the critique of the American system so vocally expressed in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East mirrors the ideational threat Toynbee saw posed by communism. In the emerging geopolitical picture, Europe and China will indeed establish their own spheres of influence, diminishing America's decisive role in their affairs, as argues Georgetown's Charles Kupchan, author of *The End of the American*

Era. Whether this scenario of “pan-regions”—the United States dominating the Western Hemisphere, Europe calling its own shots, and China holding sway over much of Asia and the Pacific—leads to systemic conflict or a “concert of powers” remains to be seen. Yet it is certain that America, deprived of the powers of persuasion to impose itself on the rest of the world, will be forced to find ways to maximize the diminishing returns on its geopolitical influence. Fifty years after Toynbee's prophecy, can the United States *peacefully* settle into its “modest place” alongside the world's other great civilizational powers? Communism may have been defeated, with the only proven alternative being some form of market capitalism and constitutional republicanism, but the increased assertiveness of other powers makes extending this system increasingly difficult. It will have to spread itself.

All this suggests that America's “exceptionalism”—its hope of defeating the cycles of history—hinges on using power now to permanently change the rules of the geopolitical game in everyone's favor, including America's own. Yet

it is not immediately evident that the United States will define its global role differently from history's other empires, or that it will prove capable of creating long-term stability through a fair division of labor and a harmony of perceptions. Nor is it a given that the same globalization which empowers the enemies of American hegemony—be it China, Islamic fundamentalists, or both—will also facilitate a new global consensus in which a balance of power is not a balance of terror, and where a “clash of civilizations” is averted.

In geopolitics, theory and practice always seem to be chasing each other. In recent years a number of highly respected scholars and intellectuals have expounded on humankind's political future, including Francis Fukuyama (*The End of History*), Michael Mandelbaum (*The Ideas That Conquered the World*), Michael Ignatieff (*Virtual War*), Benjamin Barber (*Jihad vs. McWorld*), Fareed Zakaria (*The Future of Freedom*), Joseph Nye (*The Paradox of American Power*) and, of course, Samuel Huntington. But it is Henry Kissinger—witness to and architect of modern geopolitics—who transcends both the optimism and determinism of others to provide realistic guidance. Already in his first book he cautioned that “Force might conquer the world but it cannot legitimize itself.” Instead, as he has recently

*America has reached the apogee of its power.
Can it go anywhere but downhill from here?*

commented on several occasions, the test of this generation of foreign policymakers is to transform American power to secure a consensus on international norms that protects American values.

In revolutionary times, there is a tendency to repudiate and make a clean break from the past, a pattern that carries increasing danger, particularly if America does not accommodate Chinese and European worldviews into its architecture of world order by making concessions to Europe's preference for a global rule of law and China's guarded strategy toward embracing globalization. The United States should use this critical window of opportunity to reshape global institutions toward greater accountability by sharing burdens and responsibility, but also blame. Doing so would simultaneously raise America's credibility, serve its national interests, and reduce suspicion of the world's only superpower.

In *After Victory*, John Ikenberry argues that—rather than treating alliance partners and other countries like satellites, client states, or protectorates—the United States should act with “strategic restraint,” limiting the exercise of its power. It also should use institutions to establish binding commitments, from friends and foes alike, to the “international constitution” that America itself has created. Before resigning from the Bush administration, Richard Haass, a high-ranking State Department official, had been one of the few who spoke of a doctrine of “integration,” in which the United States seeks to “build something called an international society . . . [to] get the other power centers in the world”—China, Russia, Japan, Europe, and India—“to sign up to some of the same principles and some of the same goals that we want.” But to get other powers on board in building a global concert, America must submit itself to the same global system of checks and balances, and do so with consistency and continuity.

THE RISK OF SUICIDE

Self-restraint, unfortunately, is not an American virtue. There is no small irony in America's current

wavering over a vital global consensus. As Brady Kiesling wrote after resigning in February as political counselor at the US embassy in Athens, “To the extent that international law has utility, it is because we accept it. Neither the world's interests nor our own can be protected without the engagement of the United States, either as first among equals in the evolving law-based international system we largely created, or if, as now seems the case, we are rejecting that system, then as autocrat in whatever system or non-system we replace it with.” Yet neither the American government—Democrat or Republican—nor the American people should delude themselves: even for their unique empire, there is no real choice between systems today. Resistance against American power mounts with every step away from the emerging global consensus. If the “universal nation” does not uphold universal values, its world order will eventually collapse. As Toynbee himself wrote, “Great empires do not die by murder, but by suicide.”

Surveying the ruins of the *Geopolitik* practiced by Hitler, Germany's first postwar chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, remarked that “history is the sum total of things that could have been avoided.” Conscious of the fate of empires past, America now sits uncomfortably in the captain's seat of the global supertanker, facing a choice about which course to follow. If it continues along the present path, the traditional geopolitical predictions of Professor Pirtle's course could prove true. Brian Eno, the enigmatic and brilliant producer of the band U2, best sums up the other path, toward geopolitical evolution: “Isn't civilization what happens when people stop behaving as if they're trapped in a ruthless Darwinian struggle and start thinking about communities and shared futures? . . . Perhaps it's asking a lot to expect America to act differently from all the other empires in history, but wasn't that the original idea?” If America fails to seize this opportunity to choose adaptation over fundamentalism, it will have missed a chance to keep history permanently in the past. ■