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Great-Power Struggles for Primacy in the Modern Era

*The story of international politics is written in terms of the
great powers of an era.*

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During a speech delivered on January 19, 2018, to unveil the publication of a new *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, then U.S. Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis declared that great-power competition was now the primary focus of American foreign policy. The United States, he asserted, faced a serious threat from revisionist states that were attempting to reshape world affairs to promote their values and interests. In his estimation, the ambitions of these authoritarian regimes imperiled the principles and practices that had underpinned global stability for decades.

Mattis's remarks highlighted an enduring feature of politics among nations. Rather than being a momentary problem, great-power competition is a deeply rooted continuity.¹ Because there is no central arbiter in world affairs with the ability to regulate how states interact, powerful countries use their military and economic muscle to impose their will on others, pushing for contentious issues to be handled in a manner to their satisfaction. As the ancient Athenians told representatives from the city-state of Melos over 2,000 years ago, in international politics “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”²

When trying to understand international politics, it is fitting to begin where most of the action is located—the competition among the largest, wealthiest, and most well-endowed military powers.³ Controlling an enormous share of the planet's resources and possessing highly developed industrial and technological capabilities, the moves that these players make on the global chessboard affect almost everyone. Nowhere is this more evident than in their efforts to promote rules and institutions that set the parameters for acceptable conduct in international relations.

Every great power has its own ideas about what is acceptable. Sometimes their ideas differ, fueling bitter disagreements and diplomatic deadlock; occasionally they intersect, prompting hard bargaining to reach a consensus on the nature of legitimate political arrangements; and at other times they converge, laying the foundation for a commonly accepted framework that specifies the permissible goals and instruments of foreign policy. The aim of this book is to examine great-power competition over how to construct and maintain world order. We begin our analysis in this chapter by defining what constitutes a great power and describing patterns of great-power rivalry in modern history. This opens the way for the other chapters in Part I to make a comparison of the designs for world order that arose after the First and Second World Wars. Part II focuses on the evolution of world order during the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War period. Finally, Part III explores the problems and prospects of forging a new world order in the twenty-first century.

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THE WESTPHALIAN FOUNDATIONS OF THE MODERN STATE SYSTEM

The landscape of contemporary world politics traces its origins to far-reaching changes that swept across Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, most Europeans lived in a welter of fiefdoms, duchies, and principalities but thought of themselves as belonging to a larger Christian commonwealth led by the pope. As a result of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), this vertical conception of international order was superseded by a horizontal conception that recognized no higher authority (see Figure 1.1). Ever since, neither the pope nor a secular emperor would supervise international affairs.

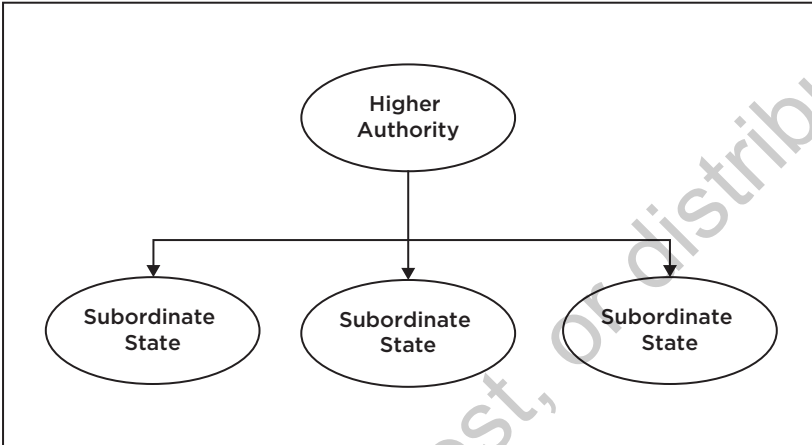
The Thirty Years' War was a complex, multifaceted conflict. One dimension of the war was religious, involving a clash between Catholics and Protestants. Another dimension was governmental, consisting of a civil war over the issue of imperial authority within the Holy Roman Empire (a territory stretching from France to Poland, made up of various lands united through marriages to the Catholic Habsburg dynasty). A third dimension was geostrategic, pitting the Austrian and Spanish branches of the House of Habsburg against the Danish, Swedish, Dutch, and French thrones.

The war was devastating. Much of central Europe lay desolate in its aftermath, stripped of resources and drained of population by massacre, famine, and disease. When the belligerents finally reached a peace agreement, they replaced the old hierarchical medieval order with a decentralized system composed of autonomous **nation-states**. Under the terms of the Peace of Westphalia (so named because it was negotiated at concurrent conferences in the German cities of Münster and Osnabrück in Westphalia), all states possessed **sovereignty**, which gave them sole jurisdiction over their territory, the exclusive right to make, interpret, and enforce laws within that territory, and the freedom to negotiate

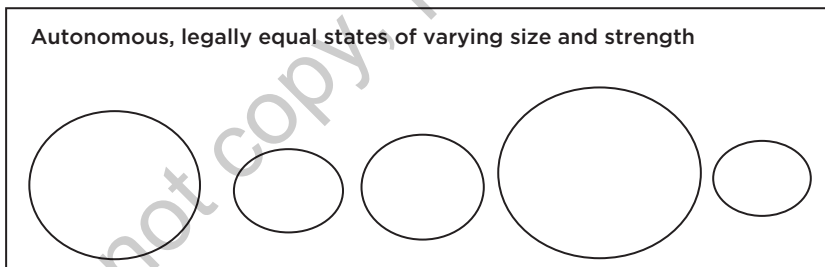
FIGURE 1.1 ALTERNATIVE TYPES OF STATE SYSTEMS

World politics can be organized in different ways. One form is hierarchical, where the constituent units of the state system are linked together in a vertical structure of superior-subordinate relationships. Another form is anarchical, where legally equal units of differential stature have no higher authority standing above them.

VERTICAL HIERARCHICAL STATE SYSTEM



HORIZONTAL ANARCHIC STATE SYSTEM



commercial treaties, form military alliances, and enter into other types of inter-state agreements without foreign interference.

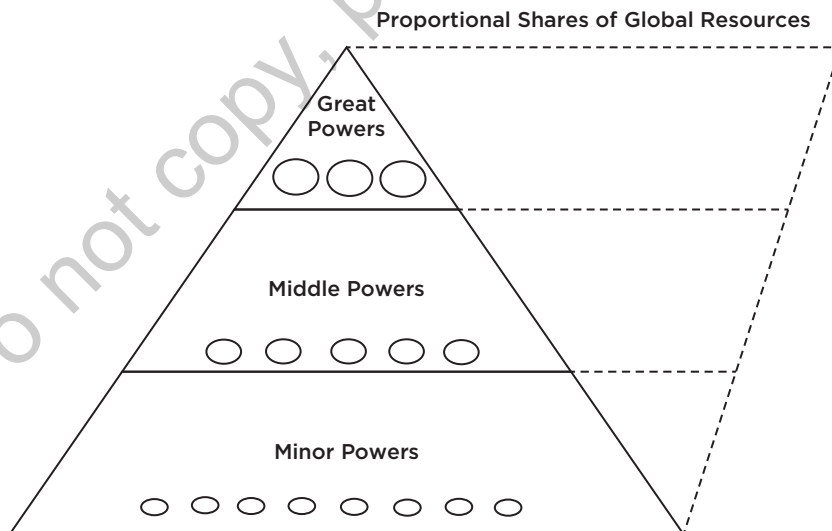
The Peace of Westphalia colored nearly every aspect of world politics over the ensuing centuries. In the absence of a higher authority to resolve disputes and provide protection, each state became responsible for its own security, with retaliatory force functioning as the court of last resort. National leaders judged whether a wrong had been committed against their countries, and they were responsible for punishing wrongdoers. By accepting **anarchy** rather than **hierarchy** as a core

tenet, the Peace of Westphalia encouraged the development of international laws that were anchored in custom, adjudicated under voluntary consent, and enforced through **self-help**. Despite the fact that these rules were not commands backed by the threat of punishment from a higher authority, states generally complied with them because their long-term interests were served by the predictability that came through shared expectations about appropriate behavior. Those who consistently played by the rules earned reputations for dependability, which made them valuable partners in collaborative undertakings. Those who broke them earned rebuke, which led them to be distrusted.

Under the canons of Westphalian diplomacy, all nation-states were equal before the law. They possessed the same rights and duties, they could appeal to the same legal rules when defending their actions, and they could expect to have those rules applied impartially whenever they consented to have an intermediary resolve their disputes. Even though nation-states were legal equals, they varied widely in size and strength. As Figure 1.2 illustrates, the Westphalian system

FIGURE 1.2 STRATIFICATION WITHIN THE STATE SYSTEM

Although there is no higher authority in world politics, the state system is stratified. Great (or major) powers enjoy the largest share of human and material resources, middle powers possess substantial but proportionally fewer resources, and minor powers have the least resources relative to everyone else. Occasionally, one or two great powers may achieve a position of dominance over the other great powers.⁴



Source: Based on Richard Rosecrance, *International Relations: Peace or War?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 108–109.

was anarchic but also stratified. Large wealthy states existed alongside small poverty-stricken ones, with the former populating the upper strata of the international pecking order and the latter occupying the lower tier. These rankings were not static. States rose and fell over time, experiencing uneven growth rates that increased the prominence of some while diminishing the standing of others. Because those with high stature had disproportionate influence over world affairs, routinely crafting the rules of the game under which everyone played, Westphalia's legacy was a recurring struggle for position. In the anarchic nation-state system that arose after the Thirty Years' War, all countries understood that the great powers were the chief architects of world order.

WHAT ARE GREAT POWERS?

Although the notion that some states were economically and militarily more significant than others informed the Westphalian peace settlement, the term *great power* did not appear until a few decades later, and only entered into regular diplomatic discourse in the early nineteenth century. Presumably, the lack of an agreed upon definition contributed to its slow adoption. People had an intuitive sense of the concept but used different criteria when they classified certain states as great powers.

Beneath these intuitive conceptions were impressions about the putative or potential **power** of different states. In political vernacular, power refers to the capacity to control the behavior of others, making the leaders of another country continue a course of action, change what they are doing, or refrain from taking certain steps. A powerful state can significantly raise the odds that others will behave in ways that it favors and lower the odds of behavior it opposes. Power, in other words, is a performance trait. We rate a state's power based on the amount of influence that it can exert under certain specified conditions.

Power is frequently described as the currency of politics. It is a means by which one party can influence the behavior of another. Measuring political power is difficult, akin to measuring purchasing power in a barter economy. In an economy without money, purchasing power cannot be calculated exactly, though it can be estimated based on the resources that someone has available to trade.⁵ Similarly, without consensus on a standard unit of account for gauging political power, scholars and policymakers have problems quantifying a state's power, but it can be estimated by itemizing a state's capabilities—under the assumption that power is a function of certain aptitudes and endowments.

If the wellsprings of national power lie deep within the bedrock of capabilities, from which specific resources does power flow? People who agree that national power derives from a country's resource base often disagree over which components are most important. Normally some combination of geographic, demographic, economic, and other tangible factors are mixed with intangible factors like leadership, morale, and the cultural attractiveness known

as **soft power**.⁶ Though the formulas may differ, the end results are usually the same: Power is equated with those capabilities that enhance a country's war-fighting ability.

The importance routinely accorded to martial prowess arises from the tendency to regard force as the *ultima ratio* in anarchical systems. However, military strength may be effective for influencing behavior in some contexts, but it is ineffective in others. The capabilities that allow a state to influence one country under certain circumstances may have little value when trying to win over another country in a different situation. Indeed, they may be counterproductive. For example, threatening nuclear retaliation against an adversary might deter it from attacking, but brandishing these weapons would hardly persuade it to open its domestic market to the threatening country's exports. Military capabilities obviously contribute to a state's potential power, but we must be careful not to presume that arms are the only source of influence. The power to destroy is not the power to control.

In summary, a few titans stand out in any historical era owing to their extensive interests, superior capabilities, and willingness to project power abroad to influence the course of international events. Their relative power can be gauged in terms of the kinds of targets and behaviors that they can affect and the types of inducements and sanctions that they can employ when attempting to exert influence. A great power is a state that is able to exercise control over a *wide domain of targets* and an *extensive scope of behaviors* by virtue of having the economic and military capabilities that put a *broad range of rewards and punishments* at its disposal. While it has the inclination and assets to exert substantial clout in world affairs, such a state is not necessarily "great" in the sense of exhibiting exemplary behavior deserving of moral respect and social esteem.

Despite scholarly quibbling over which capabilities, singularly or collectively, determine national ranking in world affairs, there is broad agreement on the roster of modern great powers. Table 1.1 lists those states that have generally been seen as great powers since the Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War. It shows that their numbers have fluctuated over time as membership expanded from a largely European core to encompass countries from North America and Asia. During this period, some states (France, the United Kingdom) have remained at the top of the global pyramid of power; others (Austria, the Netherlands, the Ottoman Empire, Spain, Sweden) have fallen away; a few (Russia/Soviet Union, Germany, Japan) have declined and then regained great-power status; and still others have emerged from an illustrious past (China) or relative obscurity (United States) to reach the pinnacle of global power.

Compared to other states from this period, the great powers listed in Table 1.1 were more likely to forge alliances, initiate militarized disputes, intervene into ongoing conflicts, and cause wars to expand.⁷ Although they did not always get their way, as the French and American experiences in Vietnam illustrate,⁸ these states were doggedly active in the international arena, wielding their power whenever opportunities arose to gain an advantage at an acceptable cost.

TABLE 1.1 GREAT POWERS SINCE THE PEACE OF WESTPHALIA

Scholars disagree over how to identify great powers. Although they use different criteria, diplomatic historians and social scientists generally agree on the list of great powers since the Peace of Westphalia. Although the hereditary and religious monarchs of the seventeenth century have been described as ruling entities more like dynasties than modern nation-states, most analysts have nonetheless described them as great powers.⁹

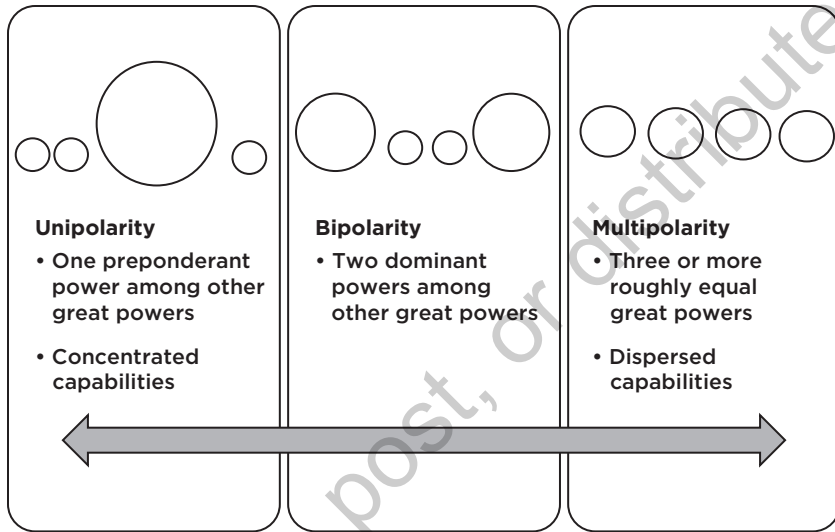
State	Qualifying Years
Austrian Habsburgs/Austria/Austria-Hungary	1648–1918
England/Great Britain/United Kingdom	1648–
France	1648–
Ottoman Empire	1648–1699
Spain	1648–1808
Sweden	1648–1721
The Netherlands	1648–1713
Russia/Soviet Union/Russian Federation	1721–1917, 1922–
Prussia/Germany/Federal Republic of Germany	1740–1918, 1925–1945, 1991–
Italy	1860–1943
Japan	1895–1945, 1991–
United States	1898–
China	1950–

REGULARITIES IN GREAT-POWER BEHAVIOR

Thus far we have emphasized how great powers differ from other members of the state system. These differences are important, but considerable variation can also exist among the great powers. One way to think about these power differentials is to look at the **polarity** of the state system. As depicted in Figure 1.3, polarity refers to the *distribution* of power among the system's leading states. **Unipolar** configurations have one dominant power center, **bipolar** configurations contain two centers of power, and **multipolar** configurations possess more than two such centers. Movement back and forth among unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity is a manifestation of the more general process of capability concentration and diffusion. When the distribution of military and economic capabilities is extremely concentrated, a single preponderant power stands over its contemporaries like a colossus.

FIGURE 1.3 POLARITY AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF NATIONAL CAPABILITIES

Power can be distributed in different ways. It can be highly concentrated or widely dispersed. When it is dispersed in a multipolar configuration, the size of the system refers to the number of nearly equal great powers. Thus, multipolar systems may include three, four, or even more great powers that are on a par with one another.



Conversely, when capabilities are highly diffused, several peer states occupy the summit of international power.

Although the political leaders of great powers prefer to stand alone at the apex of world power, most lack the means to do so. Unipolar periods are rare. Two standard examples from the early history of the Westphalian state system are France from 1659 to 1713 and again from 1797 to 1815. During the first period, King Louis XIV possessed a large, well-equipped, and professionally trained military. Unlike many previous European armies, which were a hodgepodge of mercenary units loyal primarily to the officers that recruited them, the French army was an efficient, disciplined instrument of national policy. No other great power could defeat it in battle. Only a large coalition of states was ultimately able to prevent France from solidifying its dominant position. Likewise, in the second period, Napoleon Bonaparte directed a formidable military that combined firepower and rapid flanking maneuvers to mass devastating force against the weakest point in an opponent's lines. Once again, France could best any state in combat and

was stopped only by a grand coalition of other great powers. Despite having impressive capabilities at their command, neither Louis XIV nor Napoleon were able to achieve **hegemony**.

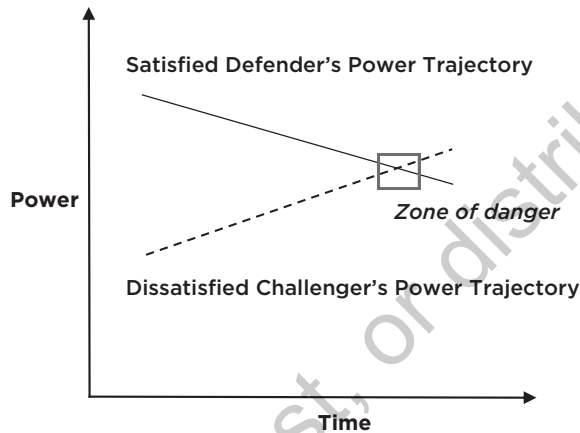
Whereas unipolarity entails a high concentration of capabilities in the hands of a single state, hegemony implies something more. In addition to being inordinately strong relative to other great powers, a hegemon aims to exercise international leadership and its mastery is largely accepted.¹⁰ France under both Louis XIV and Napoleon not only surpassed the other great powers in military capability but also sought a position of leadership that would allow officials in Paris to overhaul the prevailing international order. Although the French failed in both cases, their unrelenting efforts highlight a persistent pattern in world politics.

Throughout the annals of modern world politics, the ascendancy of one great power relative to the others prompted resistance. Sheer strength did not always command deference; often it bred defiant opposition. Great powers historically have tried to block any of their contemporaries from becoming hegemonies that could single-handedly control everyone else. Whenever this struggle for primacy escalated to war, the victors normally designed rules and institutions that they believed would prevent a recurrence of hostilities and preserve their supremacy. However, staving off future challenges to the postwar settlement always proved costly, even for the leading member of the winning coalition. **Imperial overstretch**—the gap between external commitments and internal resources—can saddle a freshly minted global leader with expenses that retard long-term economic growth as its resources are increasingly devoted to military purposes rather than creating wealth.¹¹ Every dollar spent to counter a possible threat is a dollar not available for domestic needs. The dilemma, as U.S. president Dwight Eisenhower explained, is to “figure out how far you should go without destroying from within what you are trying to defend from without.”¹²

Apart from the heavy toll extracted by global engagement, a new leader's position can also erode because national economies expand and contract at different rates. Competitors who chafe under the rules and institutions implemented by the leading state but are unencumbered by extensive foreign commitments can focus their efforts on the home front, developing national industries and innovative technologies that may ultimately yield productive, commercial, and financial advantages. According to what has been dubbed **power transition theory**, conflict between great powers that are satisfied with the status quo and those that question its legitimacy can turn violent when the distribution of power begins tilting toward the disgruntled (see Figure 1.4). War often involves a “rear-end” collision between a rising dissatisfied state and a once-preeminent state that is striving to arrest its decline. When the relative strength of the revisionist challenger and the former top dog begin converging, the odds of the two sides squaring off increase. Either the declining leader initiates a preventive war so as not to be overtaken by the challenger, or the

FIGURE 1.4 POWER TRANSITIONS AND WAR

According to power transition theory, war is unlikely when a satisfied defender of the prevailing world order holds a dominant position over any potential challenger. The danger of war mounts when the defender's preponderance erodes and a dissatisfied challenger increases in strength, eventually overtaking the defender in relative power.¹³



Source: Based on Ronald L. Tammer, et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House, 2000), 21–22.

challenger strikes first, confident that it can accelerate its climb to the zenith of international power.¹⁴ Another hegemonic war is not preordained, however. Shifts in relative power create discontinuities between the expectations of national leaders and the realities they face, but the more gradual the changes in the power trajectories of each side, the greater the likelihood that they can adapt and avert armed conflict.¹⁵

Table 1.2 displays the major, system-transforming wars that have been fought between aspiring hegemons and their principal rivals since the beginning of the seventeenth century. Research on these wars suggests that volatility in the great-power pecking order is destabilizing.¹⁶ If a clear, coherent rank order exists among the great powers, with the leading state holding an obvious advantage over its nearest rival, then the probability that some other great power will underestimate the leader's strength and try to alter the system by force are diminished because the price for challengers is prohibitive. On the other hand, if the great-power ranking is nebulous, with the advantage of the leading state eroding, the chances of a confrontation increase. Stark inconsistencies between a challenger's potency and prestige tend to foster complaints of undeserved treatment, perceptions of strategic opportunity, and bids for primacy.

TABLE 1.2 HEGEMONIC WARS IN THE MODERN ERA

Over the past four centuries, states desiring to achieve hegemonic status have fought against coalitions of other great powers that have blocked their aspirations. Each of these major, system-transforming wars has been followed by a period of international rule-making and institution-building.

War	Aspiring Hegemon	Great-Power Opposition	Foundation for New World Order
Thirty Years' War (1618–1648)	Austrian Habsburgs (aligned with Spain)	England, France, the Netherlands, Sweden	Peace of Westphalia: Treaties of Münster and Osnabrück (1648)
Wars of Louis XIV (1688–1713)	France	Austrian Habsburgs, England, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden	Treaties of Utrecht (1713) and Rastatt (1714)
Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815)	France	Austria, Great Britain, Prussia, Russia	Congress of Vienna (1815) and Concert of Europe
World War I (1914–1918)	Germany (aligned with Austria-Hungary)	France, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, United States	Treaty of Versailles (1919) and League of Nations
World War II (1939–1945)	Germany (aligned with Japan and Italy)	France, Great Britain, Soviet Union, United States	Bretton Woods system (1944), United Nations (1945)

CONTENDING APPROACHES TO WORLD ORDER

Given the relentless competition among great powers, what prevents world politics from being in a constant state of upheaval? The international system is anarchic; no higher authority governs state behavior. Surely, one might suppose that international life would resemble the “war of all against all” described by the sixteen-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. In his image of the state of nature—a hypothetical condition that preceded government—conflict is incessant as egoistic actors struggle with one another to acquire scarce resources. Yet even in the ruthless self-help arena of world politics, the competitors recognize that their interests are served by having a rudimentary set of ground rules. Just as the participants in a pickup game of basketball follow rules that regulate play, states expect that certain conventions will be observed when they interact. World politics is tempestuous, but it is not total bedlam. Instead of taking place

in an utterly chaotic environment, politics among nations transpires within what has aptly been called an *anarchical society*, because a generally accepted framework of world order moderates state behavior.¹⁷

The framework of world order rests on two pillars, one anchored in international norms and the other in institutional mechanisms devised to prevent any one great power from subduing all others. The former spells out a set of prescriptions and proscriptions that define the limits of permissible action; the latter physically reinforces normative restraints on the aims and methods of foreign policy. Neither pillar eliminates great-power competition, but together they moderate it by helping ensure that conflicts are over adjustments to the political framework for coordinating international interactions rather than being challenges to the legitimacy of the framework itself.¹⁸ Let us briefly examine each of these pillars more closely.

International norms are shared understandings about appropriate state conduct in specific situations. They convey a collective evaluation of what ought to be done and a collective expectation about what will be done. The injunctions they communicate vary over time, ranging from permissive to restrictive. *Permissive* norms give states wide latitude on using force as an instrument of statecraft and on repudiating agreements whenever they wish to free themselves from treaty obligations. *Restrictive* norms limit the use of force and uphold the sanctity of treaties.

Compliance with international norms elicits approval from other states; non-compliance, disapproval. Norms are particularly influential among states with leadership that is sensitive to their reputations because approval and disapproval, and the concomitant prospects of social inclusion or exclusion, reflect on one's identity as an upstanding member of the society of states. States that fail to abide by international norms tend to be seen in a negative light, which prejudices others against future collaboration. Concerned that the loss of prospective gains might outweigh any short-term benefits from noncompliance, national leaders generally observe the rules of the game even if they do not advance their immediate interests.

The institutional mechanisms in a framework of world order are organizational arrangements devised to induce restraint when and where normative rules break down. The structure and scope of these arrangements has also varied throughout modern history, ranging from tacit agreements among the great powers to block the rise of an aspiring hegemon to explicit covenants pledging concerted action against a wider array of security threats.

The rules and institutions of world order do not appear automatically. Foreign policy makers design them. In addition to deciding how to treat defeated powers after a hegemonic war (see Box 1.1), heads of state choose whether the framework should be based on permissive or restrictive norms as well what types of institutions will fortify the new code of statecraft. Forging a stable world order is difficult. No blueprint exists. The two most prominent theories of world politics—realism and liberalism—offer contradictory advice to policymakers. Of course, these are not the only theories that suggest how to build world order, but because they have had the greatest impact on policymakers, it is fitting that we briefly describe the worldviews that they espouse.

Box 1.1 You Decide

Picture yourself as the chief national security adviser to the political leader of your country. A long, devastating war has just ended. Over 2.5 million combatants have perished. When measured by battle deaths per population, the toll exceeds all previous wars fought during the preceding three centuries.

Your country was part of a broad coalition that triumphed over a brilliant military commander from a nearby state that seized power through a coup d'état. After ousting the old regime, he unleashed his powerful army on surrounding nations, implanting a revolutionary ideology throughout the lands he conquered as a preliminary step toward establishing hegemonic control over the entire state system. Following his defeat and incarceration, an international congress was convened to craft a set of rules and institutions to build a stable postwar international order. Your task is to recommend how the vanquished state should be treated now that the fighting is over.

There is no simple answer to the question of how victors should deal with the vanquished. No stock formula exists for constructing a durable postwar order. Policymakers confronting this question often find themselves pulled in opposite directions by two contending schools of thought. One school counsels leniency: Victors should be magnanimous to extinguish any desire for revenge by the loser. The other school calls for sterner measures: Victors should be harsh to ensure that the losing side's defeat is irreversible. The first approach seeks stability by building trust between former belligerents; the second is by eliminating a defeated foe's capacity to mount a future military challenge.

The conventional wisdom says you should act in terms of national interest. And why not? Why should anyone pass up an opportunity to make his or her country's situation better? That said, a fundamental problem remains: What defines how your interests are served?

Ascertaining whether a lenient or a punitive peace settlement is in a country's national interest is difficult because of the complex trade-offs between short-term security and long-term reconciliation. Victors face both demands for immediate revenge from domestic constituencies as well as the real possibility that they may need to seek the cooperation of the defeated state at some point later in time. What constitutes the national interest is not self-evident. Some victors do not enough to protect their security, humiliating the defeated without weakening their capacity to retaliate; others go too far, plundering the defeated only to create an archrival who dreams of getting even.

Determining how to treat defeated great powers is a crucial preliminary to constructing a durable postwar world order. What is your advice? Would you advocate a lenient or a punitive peace settlement in this case? Why?

Realism

Political realism has a distinguished pedigree, with intellectual roots in the seminal works of Thucydides, Kautilya, and Han Fei in ancient Greece, India, and China, respectively. As might be expected given its long history, several versions of realist thought have evolved over time, including a power politics (or *realpolitik*) version inspired by the sixteenth-century Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, a prudential version exemplified by the twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and several recent structural versions that emphasize how state behavior is influenced more by the anarchic environment of world politics than the passions and material appetites of human nature.

Realists of all stripes see world politics as a ceaseless struggle for power among territorially organized states of unequal strength. Relations among states wax and wane according to the changes in the distribution of their military might. Without a higher authority to govern the state system, the powerful can take advantage of the powerless. Uncertain about the intentions of neighboring states, national leaders rely upon arms and alliances for security rather than count on the goodwill of potential adversaries.

Realists are pessimists on politics and consequentialists on ethics. They deny that there can be a perennial harmony of interests among competitive political actors and insist that decisions about world order can only be judged in terms of their consequences in particular situations. Whatever actions that are in the interest of state security must be carried out, no matter how discordant they may seem in the light of one's personal beliefs. Whereas moral values about right and wrong may guide the behavior of ordinary people in their daily lives, reason of state (*raison d'état*) must govern the conduct of leaders responsible for their nation's survival. Foreign policy emanates from strategic imperatives, not from the noble ideals.

Liberalism

Like realism, liberal theory has a long, distinguished history, dating back to the political writings of John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Adam Smith. As in the case of realism, there are several variants of liberal thought. Drawing broad conclusions from a diverse body of theory risks misrepresenting any particular thinker on the topic of world order. Still, there are enough similarities to identify some common themes.

For liberals, foreign policy should be formulated by decision makers who recognize the costs of conflict and share significant interests. Rather than a struggle for relative gains, politics among nations is seen as a search for consensus and mutual benefits in an interdependent world. Believing in reason and progress, liberals profess faith in the capacity of humanity to adopt reforms, implementing practices that reduce the likelihood of armed conflict. One such reform entails facilitating economic exchanges among countries. Open markets and free trade, liberal theorists contend, create material incentives to resolve disputes peacefully.

Whereas war interrupts commerce, shrinks profits, and reduces prosperity, the unfettered flow of goods and services among nations increases communication, erodes parochialism, and encourages states to avoid ruinous clashes.

A second reform encourages democratization. Grounded in due process and the rule of law, democratic governments are touted by liberals as polities that rely on peaceful modes of conflict resolution. Instead of resolving disputes by brute force, they employ judicial methods. When democracies clash with one another in international affairs, they are more likely than autocratic regimes to use courts rather than combat to settle their quarrel.¹⁹ Thus, according to liberals, if more countries had democratic governance, less warfare would occur.

Finally, a third reform typically found in liberal theories calls for building a network of **intergovernmental organizations**. Besides offering a forum where states can debate pressing issues and mediate lingering disagreements, these bodies provide a venue for sharing information and working together on problems that crisscross borders. Regular consultation and collaboration promote strategic restraint and help build a sense of common identity, which liberals view as the foundation for world order.

As summarized in Table 1.3, realists and liberals have different interpretations of world politics and hold divergent views on how to construct world order. Besides an empirical component that purportedly describes how states behave, both theories contain a normative component that prescribes how states allegedly should behave.

TABLE 1.3 THE PREMISES AND WORLD-ORDER PREFERENCES OF REALIST AND LIBERAL THEORIES

	Realism	Liberalism
Premises:		
View of human nature	Competitive, egoistic	Cooperative, altruistic
Core concern(s)	National interests	National and global interests
Policy orientation	Maintaining independence	Maintaining interdependence
Conception of politics	A struggle for relative gains	A search for mutual gains
Guiding principle	Strategic necessity	Moral duty
Philosophical outlook	Pessimistic	Optimistic
Preferences:		
Normative order	Permissive	Restrictive
Reinforcing mechanism	Countervailing power	Community of power

Realists are inclined to support permissive international norms—elastic standards that authorize leaders to do whatever it takes to enhance national security whenever foreign threats arise. As they see it, flexible rules allow heads of state to wield power robustly, suppressing challengers that may be dissatisfied by the international status quo. To realists, world order means finding a workable consensus and a durable balance of power that constrain clashing ambitions. In an environment where cordiality and graciousness at diplomatic ceremonies mask the self-regarding intentions of fierce competitors, it pays to have rules of the game so long as they do not compromise national security. Establishing and sustaining rules that everyone accepts as effective and legitimate is difficult, however. Great powers are self-regarding. Primarily interested in their own security and always attuned to opportunities that might increase their relative power, the danger of defection constantly looms over any framework of world order.

Liberal theorizing strikes a more optimistic tone. All states have an interest in peace, and most are led by reasonable people. With the right reforms—open markets, democratic governance, and common organizational memberships—great-power competition can be tamed, international comity promoted, and the world made safer. To advance these reforms, liberals advocate restrictive international norms and a web of quasi-legislative and judicial institutions. Unlike in permissive world orders, where considerations of expediency give immense discretion to foreign policy decision makers, liberal thinkers believe that restrictive orders, which obligate states to abide by their commitments, limit the scale of interstate competition, prompting the great powers to calibrate their behavior with an eye on the common good.

Proponents of realism and liberalism have long debated one another about the paths to peace, as the foregoing synopsis of their philosophies of statecraft suggests. When hegemonic wars end, their debate becomes intense because battlefield success, no matter how overwhelming, does not inevitably yield a durable postwar order. National leaders must decide how to design and implement a new world order. Should they be guided by realism? Should they heed the recommendations of liberalism? Or should they follow some other theory of world politics? The choices they face are among the most momentous they ever make.

BUILDING WORLD ORDER IN THE AFTERMATH OF HEGEMONIC WAR

Ever since the dawn of the modern international system, sovereign territorial states have varied in size, wealth, population, and military capabilities. Without a higher authority to call on for protection, they have relied on self-help to defend their interests. Small states with few resources posed little threat to their neighbors, but larger, brawnier countries have always been wary of their peers. Unsure of one another's intentions, great powers understandably regard each

other with suspicion. Feeling vulnerable in an anarchic environment, the most ambitious among them have often sought to guarantee their security by achieving hegemony over the rest.²⁰ Any great power considers itself exposed “as long as there are others which are stronger,” observed the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. “Its security and its preservation demand that it becomes more powerful than all its neighbors.”²¹

Efforts to attain absolute security by one great power tend to be perceived as creating absolute insecurity for the others, with the result that they all become locked into an upward spiral of countermeasures that diminishes each rival's safety. Scholars refer to this as the **security dilemma**, a condition that results when each great power's increase in military capabilities is matched by another's and all wind up being no better off than when they began arming.²² Attempts to achieve “peace through strength” are understandable in a world where states alone are responsible for their security, but they can create an atmosphere that leads each side to arm, seek allies, and resort to coercive bargaining tactics. Individually, none of these factors may be sufficient to spark hostilities, but together they can lead to repeated military confrontations. Studies of crisis bargaining find that rivals tend to escalate the level of threats and demonstrations of force in each successive encounter, which elevates the probability of war as crises mount.²³

Predicting exactly when a great-power war will occur is problematic due to the role of chance in world politics. Additionally, we have no way of knowing in what ways the future might resemble what has happened before. “All efforts to discern patterns of recurrence,” Reinhold Niebuhr cautions, “must do violence to the infinite variety in the strange configurations of history.”²⁴ Strictly speaking, the world situation is always unprecedented, yet it is never entirely unlike situations in the past. Even if history cannot provide us with perfect analogies, it is helpful to look for patterns that may provide insight into how world politics might develop. When used carefully, history can prevent premature cognitive closure, helping us frame sharper questions, suggesting alternatives that might otherwise have been overlooked, and encouraging us to search for additional information to inform us about the prospects for humanity to chart a safe path toward world order.

The next two chapters begin our investigation of historical patterns. They focus on the efforts of great powers to build world order after World Wars I and II. Juxtaposing these two hegemonic brawls helps provide a basis for assessing how past wars—and the way in which they were settled—may sow the seeds of either an enduring peace or a new confrontation. Moreover, comparing these epic struggles highlights the different policy prescriptions emanating from the realist and liberal theoretical traditions. In presenting these two wars and their peace settlements, Chapters 2 and 3 tell the story of a series of fateful decisions made during the first half of the twentieth century that ultimately shaped the second half of the century and the beginning of the new millennium.

KEY TERMS

anarchy	4	polarity	8
bipolar	8	power	6
hegemony	10	power transition theory	10
hierarchy	4	security dilemma	18
imperial overstretch	10	self-help	5
intergovernmental organizations	16	soft power	7
multipolar	8	sovereignty	3
nation-states	3	unipolar	8

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