

Hegemonic War and International Change

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Because of the redistribution of power, the costs to the traditional dominant state of maintaining the international system increase relative to its capacity to pay; this, in turn, produces the severe fiscal crisis. . . . By the same token, the costs to the rising state of changing the system decrease; it begins to appreciate that it can increase its own gains by forcing changes in the nature of the system. Its enhanced power position means that the relative costs of changing the system and securing its interests have decreased. Thus, in accordance with the law of demand, the rising state, as its power increases, will seek to change the status quo as the perceived potential benefits begin to exceed the perceived costs of undertaking a change in the system.

As its relative power increases, a rising state attempts to change the rules governing the international system, the division of the spheres of influence, and, most important of all, the international distribution of territory. In response, the dominant power counters this challenge through changes in its policies that attempt to restore equilibrium in the system. The historical record reveals that if it fails in this attempt, the disequilibrium will be resolved by war. Shepard Clough, in his book *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, drew on a distinguished career in historical scholarship to make the point: "At least in all the cases which we have passed . . . in review in these pages, cultures with inferior civilization but with growing economic power have always attacked the most civilized cultures during the latter's economic decline" (1970, p. 263). The fundamental task of the challenged dominant state is to solve what Walter Lippmann once characterized as the fundamental problem of foreign policy—the balancing of commitments and resources (Lippmann, 1943, p. 7). An imperial, hegemonic, or great power has essentially two courses of action open to it as it attempts to restore equilibrium in the system. The first and preferred solution is that the challenged power can seek to increase the resources devoted to maintaining its commitments and position in the international system. The second is that it can attempt to reduce its existing commitments (and associated costs) in a way that does not ultimately jeopardize its international position. Although neither response will be followed to the exclusion of the other, they may be considered analytically as separate policies. The logic and the pitfalls of each policy will be considered in turn.

Historically, the most frequently employed devices to generate new resources to meet the increasing costs of dominance and to forestall decline have been to increase domestic taxation and to exact tribute from other states.

Both of these courses of action have inherent dangers in that they can provoke resistance and rebellion. The French Revolution was triggered in part by the effort of the monarchy to levy the higher taxes required to meet the British challenge (von Ranke, 1950, p. 211). Athens's "allies" revolted against Athenian demands for increased tribute. Because higher taxes (or tribute) mean decreased productive investment and a lowered standard of living, in most instances such expedients can be employed for only relatively short periods of time, such as during a war.

The powerful resistance within a society to higher taxes or tribute encourages the government to employ more indirect methods of generating additional resources to meet a fiscal crisis. Most frequently, a government will resort to inflationary policies or seek to manipulate the terms of trade with other countries. As Carlo Cipolla observed (1970, p. 13), the invariable symptoms of a society's decline are excessive taxation, inflation, and balance-of-payments difficulties as government and society spend beyond their means. But these indirect devices also bring hardship and encounter strong resistance over the long run.

The most satisfactory solution to the problem of increasing costs is increased efficiency in the use of existing resources. Through organizational, technological, and other types of innovations, a state can either economize with respect to the resources at its disposal or increase the total amount of disposable resources. Thus, as Mark Elvin explained, the fundamental reason that imperial China survived intact for so long was its unusually high rate of economic and technological innovation; over long periods China was able to generate sufficient resources to finance the costs of protection against successive invaders (Elvin, 1973). Conversely, the Roman economy stagnated and failed to innovate. Among the reasons for the decline and destruction of Rome was its inability to generate resources sufficient to stave off barbarian invaders. More recently, the calls for greater industrial productivity in contemporary America derive from the realization that technological innovation and more efficient use of existing resources are needed to meet the increasing demands of consumption, investment, and protection.

This innovative solution involves rejuvenation of the society's military, economic, and political institutions. In the case of declining Rome, for example, a recasting of its increasingly inefficient system of agricultural production and a revised system of taxation were required. Unfortunately, social reform and institutional rejuvenation become increasingly difficult as a society ages, because this implies more general changes in customs, attitudes, motivation, and sets of values that constitute a cultural heritage (Cipolla, 1970, p. 11). Vested interests resist the loss of their privileges. Institutional rigidities frustrate abandonment of "tried and true" methods (Downs, 1967, pp. 158–66). One could hardly expect it to be otherwise: "Innovations are important not for their immediate, actual results but for their potential for future development, and potential is very difficult to assess" (Cipolla, 1970, pp. 9–10).

A declining society experiences a vicious cycle of decay and immobility, much as a rising society enjoys a virtuous cycle of growth and expansion.

On the one hand, decline is accompanied by lack of social cooperation, by emphasis on rights rather than emphasis on duty, and by decreasing productivity. On the other hand, the frustration and pessimism generated by this gloomy atmosphere inhibit renewal and innovation. The failure to innovate accentuates the decline and its psychologically debilitating consequences. Once caught up in this cycle, it is difficult for the society to break out (Cipolla, 1970, p. 11). For this reason, a more rational and more efficient use of existing resources to meet increasing military and productive needs is seldom achieved.

There have been societies that have managed their resources with great skill for hundreds of years and have rejuvenated themselves in response to external challenges, and this resilience has enabled them to survive for centuries in a hostile environment. In fact, those states that have been notable for their longevity have been the ones most successful in allocating their scarce resources in an optimal fashion in order to balance, over a period of centuries, the conflicting demands of consumption, protection, and investment. An outstanding example was the Venetian city-state. Within this aristocratic republic the governing elite moderated consumption and shifted resources back and forth between protection and investment as need required over the centuries (Lane, 1973). The Chinese Empire was even more significant. Its longevity and unity were due to the fact that the Chinese were able to increase their production more rapidly than the rise in the costs of protection (Elvin, 1973, pp. 92-3, 317). The progressive nature of the imperial Chinese economy meant that sufficient resources were in most cases available to meet external threats and preserve the integrity of the empire for centuries. In contrast to the Romans, who were eventually inundated and destroyed by the barbarians, the Chinese "on the whole . . . managed to keep one step ahead of their neighbours in the relevant technical skills, military, economic and organizational" (Elvin, 1973, p. 20).

An example of social rejuvenation intended to meet an external challenge was that of revolutionary France. The point has already been made that European aristocracies were reluctant to place firearms in the hands of the lower social orders, preferring to rely on small professional armies. The French Revolution and the innovation of nationalism made it possible for the French state to tap the energies of the masses of French citizens. The so-called *levée en masse* greatly increased the human resources available to the republic and, later, to Napoleon. Although this imperial venture was ultimately unsuccessful, it does illustrate the potentiality for domestic rejuvenation of a society in response to decline.

The second type of response to declining fortunes is to bring costs and resources into balance by reducing costs. This can be attempted in three general ways. The first is to eliminate the reason for the increasing costs (i.e., to weaken or destroy the rising challenger). The second is to expand to a more secure and less costly defensive perimeter. The third is to reduce international commitments. Each of these alternative strategies has its attractions and its dangers.

The first and most attractive response to a society's decline is to eliminate the source of the problem. By launching a preventive war the declining power

destroys or weakens the rising challenger while the military advantage is still with the declining power. Thus, as Thucydides explained, the Spartans initiated the Peloponnesian War in an attempt to crush the rising Athenian challenger while Sparta still had the power to do so. When the choice ahead has appeared to be to decline or to fight, statesmen have most generally fought. However, besides causing unnecessary loss of life, the greatest danger inherent in preventive war is that it sets in motion a course of events over which statesmen soon lose control (see the subsequent discussion of hegemonic war).

Second, a state may seek to reduce the costs of maintaining its position by means of further expansion.¹ In effect, the state hopes to reduce its long-term costs by acquiring less costly defensive positions. As Edward Luttwak (1976) demonstrated in his brilliant study of Roman grand strategy, Roman expansion in its later phases was an attempt to find more secure and less costly defensive positions and to eliminate potential challengers. Although this response to declining fortunes can be effective, it can also lead to further overextension of commitments, to increasing costs, and thereby to acceleration of the decline. It is difficult for a successful and expanding state to break the habit of expansion, and it is all too easy to believe that "expand or die" is the imperative of international survival. Perhaps the greatest danger for every imperial or hegemonic power, as it proved eventually to be for Rome, is overextension of commitments that gradually begin to sap its strength (Grant, 1968, p. 246).²

The third means of bringing costs and resources into balance is, of course, to reduce foreign-policy commitments. Through political, territorial, or economic retrenchment, a society can reduce the costs of maintaining its international position. However, this strategy is politically difficult, and carrying it out is a delicate matter. Its success is highly uncertain and strongly dependent on timing and circumstances. The problem of retrenchment will be considered first in general terms; then a case of relatively successful retrenchment by a great power will be discussed.

The most direct method of retrenchment is unilateral abandonment of certain of a state's economic, political, or military commitments. For example, a state may withdraw from exposed and costly strategic positions. Venice, as was pointed out, pursued for centuries a conscious policy of alternating advance and retreat. The longevity of the later Roman Empire or Byzantine Empire may be partially explained by its withdrawal from its exposed and difficult-to-defend western provinces and consolidation of its position on a less costly basis in its eastern provinces; its survival for a thousand years was due to the fact that it brought the scale of empire and resources into balance (Cipolla, 1970, p. 82; Rader, 1971, p. 54). In our own time, the so-called Nixon doctrine may

¹This cause of expansion is frequently explained by the "turbulent-frontier" thesis. A classic example was Britain's steady and incremental conquest of India in order to eliminate threatening political disturbances on the frontier of the empire. Two recent examples are the American invasion of Cambodia during the Vietnam War and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

²As Raymond Aron argued (1974), defeat in Vietnam may, in the long run, save the United States from the corrupting and ultimately weakening vice of overexpansion of commitments.

be interpreted as an effort on the part of the United States to disengage from vulnerable commitments and to shift part of the burden of defending the international status quo to other powers (Hoffmann, 1978, pp. 46–7).

A second standard technique of retrenchment is to enter into alliances with or seek rapprochement with less threatening powers. In effect, the dominant but declining power makes concessions to another state and agrees to share the benefits of the status quo with that other state in exchange for sharing the costs of preserving the status quo. Thus the Romans brought the Goths into the empire (much to their later regret) in exchange for their assistance in defending the frontiers of the empire. As will be pointed out in a moment, the policy of entente or rapprochement was pursued by the British prior to World War I as they sought to meet the rising German challenge. The American rapprochement with Communist China is a late-twentieth-century example. In exchange for weakening the American commitment to Taiwan, the Americans seek Chinese assistance in containing the expanding power of the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately, there are several dangers associated with this response to decline. First, in an alliance between a great power and a lesser power there is a tendency for the former to overpay in the long run, as has occurred with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); the great power increases its commitments without a commensurate increase in the resources devoted by its allies to finance those commitments. Further, the ally is benefited materially by the alliance, and as its capabilities increase, it may turn against the declining power. Thus the Romans educated the Goths in their military techniques only to have the latter turn these techniques against them. Second, the utility of alliances is limited by Riker's theory of coalitions: An increase in the number of allies decreases the benefits to each. Therefore, as an alliance increases in number, the probability of defection increases (Riker, 1962). Third, the minor ally may involve the major ally in disputes of its own from which the latter cannot disengage itself without heavy costs to its prestige. For these reasons, the utility of an alliance as a response to decline and a means to decrease costs is severely restricted.

The third and most difficult method of retrenchment is to make concessions to the rising power and thereby seek to appease its ambitions. Since the Munich conference in 1938, "appeasement" as a policy has been in disrepute and has been regarded as inappropriate under every conceivable set of circumstances. This is unfortunate, because there are historical examples in which appeasement has succeeded. Contending states have not only avoided conflict but also achieved a relationship satisfactory to both. A notable example was British appeasement of the rising United States in the decades prior to World War I (Perkins, 1968). The two countries ended a century-long hostility and laid the basis for what has come to be known as the "special relationship" of the two Anglo-Saxon powers.

The fundamental problem with a policy of appeasement and accommodation is to find a way to pursue it that does not lead to continuing deterioration in a state's prestige and international position. Retrenchment by its very nature is an indication of relative weakness and declining power, and thus retrenchment can have a deteriorating effect on relations with allies and rivals.

Sensing the decline of their protector, allies try to obtain the best deal they can from the rising master of the system. Rivals are stimulated to "close in," and frequently they precipitate a conflict in the process. Thus World War I began as a conflict between Russia and Austria over the disposition of the remnants of the retreating Ottoman Empire (Hawtrey, 1952, pp. 75–81).

Because retrenchment signals waning power, a state seldom retrenches or makes concessions on its own initiative. Yet, not to retrench voluntarily and then to retrench in response to threats or military defeat means an even more severe loss of prestige and weakening of one's diplomatic standing. As a consequence of such defeats, allies defect to the victorious party, opponents press their advantage, and the retrenching society itself becomes demoralized. Moreover, if the forced retrenchment involves the loss of a "vital interest," then the security and integrity of the state are placed in jeopardy. For these reasons, retrenchment is a hazardous course for a state; it is a course seldom pursued by a declining power. However, there have been cases of a retrenchment policy being carried out rather successfully.

An excellent example of a declining hegemon that successfully brought its resources and commitments into balance is provided by Great Britain in the decades just prior to World War I. Following its victory over France in the Napoleonic wars, Great Britain had become the world's most powerful and most prestigious state. It gave its name to a century of relative peace, the *Pax Britannica*. British naval power was supreme on the high seas, and British industry and commerce were unchallengeable in world markets. An equilibrium had been established on the European continent by the Congress of Vienna (1814), and no military or industrial rivals then existed outside of Europe. By the last decades of the century, however, a profound transformation had taken place. Naval and industrial rivals had risen to challenge British supremacy both on the Continent and overseas. France, Germany, the United States, Japan, and Russia, to various degrees, had become expanding imperial powers. The unification of Germany by Prussia had destroyed the protective Continental equilibrium, and Germany's growing naval might threatened Britain's command of the seas.

As a consequence of these commercial, naval, and imperial challenges, Great Britain began to encounter the problems that face every mature or declining power. On the one hand, external demands were placing steadily increasing strains on the economy; on the other hand, the capacity of the economy to meet these demands had deteriorated. Thus, at the same time that the costs of protection were escalating, both private consumption and public consumption were also increasing because of greater affluence. Superficially the economy appeared strong, but the rates of industrial expansion, technological innovation, and domestic investment had slowed. Thus the rise of foreign challenges and the climacteric of the economy had brought on disequilibrium between British global commitments and British resources.

As the disequilibrium between its global hegemony and its limited resources intensified, Britain faced the dilemma of increasing its resources or reducing its commitments or both. In the national debate on this critical issue the proponents

of increasing the available resources proposed two general courses of action. First, they proposed a drawing together of the empire and drawing on these combined resources, as well as the creation of what John Seeley (1905) called Greater Britain, especially the white dominions. This idea, however, did not have sufficient appeal at home or abroad. Second, reformers advocated measures to rejuvenate the declining British economy and to achieve greater efficiency. Unfortunately, as W. Arthur Lewis argued, all the roads that would have led to industrial innovation and a higher rate of economic growth were closed to the British for social, political, or ideological reasons (Lewis, 1978, p. 133). The primary solution to the problem of decline and disequilibrium, therefore, necessarily lay in the reduction of overseas diplomatic and strategic commitments.

The specific diplomatic and strategic issue that faced British leadership was whether to maintain the global position identified with the Pax Britannica or to bring about a retrenchment of its global commitments. By the last decade of the century, Great Britain was confronted by rival land and sea powers on every continent and every sea. European rivals were everywhere: Russia in the Far East, south Asia, and the Middle East; France in Asia, the Middle East, and north Africa; Germany in the Far East, the Middle East, and Africa. Furthermore, in the Far East, Japan had suddenly emerged as a great power; the United States also was becoming a naval power of consequence and was challenging Great Britain in the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific Ocean.

At the turn of the century, however, the predominant problem was perceived to be the challenge of German naval expansionism. Whereas all the other challenges posed limited and long-term threats, the danger embodied in Germany's decision to build a battle fleet was immediate and portentous. Despite intense negotiations, no compromise of this naval armaments race could be reached. The only course open to the British was retrenchment of their power and commitments around the globe in order to concentrate their total efforts on the German challenge.

Great Britain settled its differences with its other foreign rivals one after another. In the 1890s came the settlement of the Venezuela-British Guiana border dispute in accordance with American desires; in effect, Britain acquiesced in America's primacy in the Caribbean Sea. A century of American-British uneasiness came to an end, and the foundation was laid for the Anglo-American alliance that would prevail in two world wars. Next, in the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902, Great Britain gave up its policy of going it alone and took Japan as its partner in the Far East. Accepting Japanese supremacy in the northwestern Pacific as a counterweight to Russia, Great Britain withdrew to the south. This was immediately followed in 1904 by the *entente cordiale*, which settled the Mediterranean and colonial confrontation between France and Great Britain and ended centuries of conflict. In 1907 the Anglo-Russian agreement resolved the British-Russian confrontation in the Far East, turned Russia's interest toward the Balkans, and eventually aligned Russia, Great Britain, and France against Germany and Austria. Thus, by the eve of World War I, British commitments had been retrenched to a point that Britain could employ whatever power it possessed to arrest further decline in the face of expanding German power.

Thus far we have described two alternative sets of strategies that a great power may pursue in order to arrest its decline: to increase resources or to decrease costs. Each of these policies has succeeded to some degree at one time or another. Most frequently, however, the dominant state is unable to generate sufficient additional resources to defend its vital commitments; alternatively, it may be unable to reduce its cost and commitments to some manageable size. In these situations, the disequilibrium in the system becomes increasingly acute as the declining power tries to maintain its position and the rising power attempts to transform the system in ways that will advance its interests. As a consequence of this persisting disequilibrium, the international system is beset by tensions, uncertainties, and crises. However, such a stalemate in the system seldom persists for a long period of time.

Throughout history the primary means of resolving the disequilibrium between the structure of the international system and the redistribution of power has been war, more particularly, what we shall call a hegemonic war. In the words of Raymond Aron, describing World War I, a hegemonic war “is characterized less by its immediate causes or its explicit purposes than by its extent and the stakes involved. It affected all the political units inside one system of relations between sovereign states. Let us call it, for want of a better term, a war of hegemony, hegemony being, if not conscious motive, at any rate the inevitable consequence of the victory of at least one of the states or groups” (Aron, 1964, p. 359). Thus, a hegemonic war is the ultimate test of change in the relative standings of the powers in the existing system.

Every international system that the world has known has been a consequence of the territorial, economic, and diplomatic realignments that have followed such hegemonic struggles. The most important consequence of a hegemonic war is that it changes the system in accordance with the new international distribution of power; it brings about a reordering of the basic components of the system. Victory and defeat reestablish an unambiguous hierarchy of prestige congruent with the new distribution of power in the system. The war determines who will govern the international system and whose interests will be primarily served by the new international order. The war leads to a redistribution of territory among the states in the system, a new set of rules of the system, a revised international division of labor, etc. As a consequence of these changes, a relatively more stable international order and effective governance of the international system are created based on the new realities of the international distribution of power. In short, hegemonic wars have (unfortunately) been functional and integral parts of the evolution and dynamics of international systems.

It is not inevitable, of course, that a hegemonic struggle will give rise immediately to a new hegemonic power and a renovated international order. As has frequently occurred, the combatants may exhaust themselves, and the “victorious” power may be unable to reorder the international system. The destruction of Rome by barbarian hordes led to the chaos of the Dark Ages. The Pax Britannica was not immediately replaced by the Pax Americana; there

was a twenty year interregnum, what E. H. Carr called the "twenty years' crisis." Eventually, however, a new power or set of powers emerges to give governance to the international system.

What, then, are the defining characteristics of a hegemonic war? How does it differ from more limited conflicts among states? In the first place, such a war involves a direct contest between the dominant power or powers in an international system and the rising challenger or challengers. The conflict becomes total and in time is characterized by participation of all the major states and most of the minor states in the system. The tendency, in fact, is for every state in the system to be drawn into one or another of the opposing camps. Inflexible bipolar configurations of power (the Delian League versus the Peloponnesian League, the Triple Alliance versus the Triple Entente) frequently presage the outbreak of hegemonic conflict.

Second, the fundamental issue at stake is the nature and governance of the system. The legitimacy of the system may be said to be challenged. For this reason, hegemonic wars are unlimited conflicts; they are at once political, economic, and ideological in terms of significance and consequences. They become directed at the destruction of the offending social, political, or economic system and are usually followed by religious, political, or social transformation of the defeated society. The leveling of Carthage by Rome, the conversion of the Middle East to Islam by the Arabs, and the democratization of contemporary Japan and West Germany by the United States are salient examples. . . .

Third, a hegemonic war is characterized by the unlimited means employed and by the general scope of the warfare. Because all parties are drawn into the war and the stakes involved are high, few limitations, if any, are observed with respect to the means employed; the limitations on violence and treachery tend to be only those necessarily imposed by the state of technology, the available resources, and the fear of retaliation. Similarly, the geographic scope of the war tends to expand to encompass the entire international system; these are "world" wars. Thus, hegemonic wars are characterized by their intensity, scope, and duration.

From the premodern world, the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta and the Second Punic War between Carthage and Rome meet these criteria of hegemonic war. In the modern era, several wars have been hegemonic struggles: the Thirty Years' War (1618–48); the wars of Louis XIV (1667–1713); the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon (1792–1814); World Wars I and II (1914–18, 1939–45) (Mowat, 1928, pp. 1–2). At issue in each of these great conflicts was the governance of the international system.

In addition to the preceding criteria that define hegemonic war, three preconditions generally appear to be associated with the outbreak of hegemonic war. In the first place, the intensification of conflicts among states is a consequence of the "closing in" of space and opportunities. With the aging of an international system and the expansion of states, the distance between states decreases, thereby causing them increasingly to come into conflict with one

another. The once-empty space around the centers of power in the system is appropriated. The exploitable resources begin to be used up, and opportunities for economic growth decline. The system begins to encounter limits to the growth and expansion of member states; states increasingly come into conflict with one another. Interstate relations become more and more a zero-sum game in which one state's gain is another's loss.

Marxists and realists share a sense of the importance of contracting frontiers and their significance for the stability and peace of the system. As long as expansion is possible, the law of uneven growth (or development) can operate with little disturbing effect on the overall stability of the system. In time, however, limits are reached, and the international system enters a period of crisis. The clashes among states for territory, resources, and markets increase in frequency and magnitude and eventually culminate in hegemonic war. Thus, as E. H. Carr told us, the relative peace of nineteenth-century Europe and the belief that a harmony of interest was providing a basis for increasing economic interdependence were due to the existence of "continuously expanding territories and markets" (1951, p. 224). The closing in of political and economic space led to the intensification of conflict and the final collapse of the system in the two world wars.

The second condition preceding hegemonic war is temporal and psychological rather than spatial; it is the perception that a fundamental historical change is taking place and the gnawing fear of one or more of the great powers that time is somehow beginning to work against it and that one should settle matters through preemptive war while the advantage is still on one's side. It was anxiety of this nature that Thucydides had in mind when he wrote that the growth of Athenian power inspired fear on the part of the Lacedaemonians and was the unseen cause of the war. The alternatives open to a state whose relative power is being eclipsed are seldom those of waging war versus promoting peace, but rather waging war while the balance is still in that state's favor or waging war later when the tide may have turned against it. Thus the motive for hegemonic war, at least from the perspective of the dominant power, is to minimize one's losses rather than to maximize one's gains. In effect, a precondition for hegemonic war is the realization that the law of uneven growth has begun to operate to one's disadvantage.

The third precondition of hegemonic war is that the course of events begins to escape human control. Thus far, the argument of this study has proceeded as if mankind controlled its own destiny. The propositions presented and explored in an attempt to understand international political change have been phrased in terms of rational cost/benefit calculations. Up to a point, rationality does appear to apply; statesmen do explicitly or implicitly make rational calculations and then attempt to set the course of the ship of state accordingly. But it is equally true that events, especially those associated with the passions of war, can easily escape from human control.

"What is the force that moves nations?" Tolstoy inquires in the concluding part of *War and Peace*, and he answers that ultimately it is the masses in

motion (1961, Vol. II, p. 1404). Leadership, calculation, control over events—these are merely the illusions of statesmen and scholars. The passions of men and the momentum of events take over and propel societies in novel and unanticipated directions. This is especially true during times of war. As the Athenians counseled the Peloponnesians in seeking to forestall war, “consider the vast influence of accident in war, before you engage in it. As it continues, it generally becomes an affair of chances, chances from which neither of us is exempt, and whose event we must risk in the dark. It is a common mistake in going to war to—begin at the wrong end, to act first, and wait for disaster to discuss the matter” (Thucydides, 1951, p. 45).

Indeed, men seldom determine or even anticipate the consequences of hegemonic war. Although in going to war they desire to increase their gains or minimize their losses, they do not get the war they want or expect; they fail to recognize the pent-up forces they are unleashing or the larger historical significance of the decisions they are taking. They underestimate the eventual scope and intensity of the conflict on which they are embarking and its implications for their civilization. Hegemonic war arises from the structural conditions and disequilibrium of an international system, but its consequences are seldom predicted by statesmen. As Toynbee suggested, the law governing such conflicts would appear to favor rising states on the periphery of an international system rather than the contending states in the system itself. States directly engaged in hegemonic conflict, by weakening themselves, frequently actually eliminate obstacles to conquest by a peripheral power.

The great turning points in world history have been provided by these hegemonic struggles among political rivals; these periodic conflicts have re-ordered the international system and propelled history in new and uncharted directions. They resolve the question of which state will govern the system, as well as what ideas and values will predominate, thereby determining the ethos of succeeding ages. The outcomes of these wars affect the economic, social, and ideological structures of individual societies as well as the structure of the larger international system.

In contrast to the emphasis placed here on the role of hegemonic war in changing the international system, it might be argued that domestic revolution can change the international system. This is partially correct. It would be foolish to suggest, for example, that the great revolutions of the twentieth century (the Russian, Chinese, and perhaps Iranian) have not had a profound impact on world politics. However, the primary consequence of these social and political upheavals (at least of the first two) has been to facilitate the mobilization of the society's resources for purposes of national power. In other words, the significance of these revolutions for world politics is that they have served to strengthen (or weaken) their respective states and thereby cause a redistribution of power in the system.

As the distinguished French historian Elie Halévy put it, “all great convulsions in the history of the world, and more particularly in modern Europe, have been at the same time wars and revolutions” (1965, p. 212).

Thus the Thirty Years' War was both an international war among Sweden, France, and the Hapsburg Empire and a series of domestic conflicts among Protestant and Catholic parties. The wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period that pitted France against the rest of Europe triggered political upheavals of class and national revolutions throughout Europe. World Wars I and II represented not only the decay of the European international political order but also an onslaught against political liberalism and economic laissez-faire. The triumph of American power in these wars meant not only American governance of the system but also reestablishment of a liberal world order.

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