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The Fates of Nations

Varieties of Success and Failure for Great Powers
in Long-Term Rivalries



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About This Report

This report is part of a larger project that considers the societal sources of national dynamism and competitive advantage. In this report, we aim to identify historical modes of strategic success and failure in great power rivalries that offer lessons for the United States. We define categories of success and failure (in terms of such variables as control over territory, relative power, victory or defeat in war, international legitimacy, and social stability) and offer detailed case studies on specific historical examples that are associated with success and failure. We then apply the two typologies to the current situation of the United States, at the time of this writing, to assess potential models of success and failure.

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Summary

The United States, according to official U.S. national security statements and an avalanche of commentary, is engaged in a long-term strategic rivalry with China and a lesser—but still critical—rivalry for influence with Russia. These rivalries, especially with China, promise to define U.S. foreign policy and national security challenges for decades. Yet most assessments of these rivalries tend to ignore the critical question of outcomes: What does success or failure in a rivalry look like, and what varieties of success can great powers aspire to?

The research in this report, part of a larger project that considers the societal sources of national dynamism and competitive advantage, seeks to identify historical modes of strategic success and failure in great power rivalries that offer lessons for the United States. We present categories of success and failure (in terms of such variables as control over territory, relative power, victory or defeat in war, international legitimacy, and social stability) and offer detailed case studies on specific historical examples associated with success and failure. We then discuss the implications of the typologies of both kinds of outcomes for the rivalry with China.

Approach

We approached the task through general historical surveys and in-depth case studies. We reviewed general literature on rivalry and great power rise and fall and relied in part on extensive work done over two years of the first phase of this study. We assembled a database of 165 total rivalries that spanned 1816 to 2010, of which 30 represent cases of bilateral rivalries between great powers, and sought to identify categories of success and failure for the participants. We then conducted five deeper case studies of individual great powers seeking success in global competitive terms: China and its tribute system, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prussia, the United Kingdom, and pre-World War II Japan. From this research, we derived specific modes of success and failure, as well as other insights.

Key Findings

This research allowed us to identify three broad types of rivalry outcomes: comprehensive victory and defeat, regime change or collapse or state fragmentation, and voluntary exit. Within those categories, we defined seven types of success and failure within rivalries. Table S.1 summarizes those types. In this report, we also provide examples of historical rivalries that fit each category.

TABLE S.1

Varieties of Success and Failure Within Strategic Rivalries

Type of Rivalry Outcome	Variety of Success and Failure	Primary Characteristics
Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest and occupation	- One side or set of countries defeats another and conquers or temporarily occupies the territory of that country. - The defeated power abandons future ambitions in the rivalry, either permanently or for a very long period.
	Comprehensive loss in total war	- One side decisively defeats the other in a major or total war, but the victory does not lead to full conquest or occupation. - The defeated side is forced to abandon pretensions to equivalence in the rivalry, at least for a period.
Sociopolitical transformation or fragmentation	Political transformation, revolution, or instability	- A major political change or disruption shifts the basic geopolitical stance of the nation. - There is change that is not simple in the governing party or the national attitude. - There are larger domestic shifts that fundamentally change the nation's outlook.
	Fragmentation of the political entity	An empire or nation divides into sub-entities, none of which is capable of continuing the rivalry in the same way.
Voluntary exit from the rivalry by one or both sides	Acceptance of secondary- or middle-power status	- The basic pattern is that one nation involved in a rivalry abandons some degree of its pretensions to global great power status. - The regressing power undergoes a partial retrenchment of its security ambitions. - For example, one side recognizes that the factors of scale and power prevent it from continuing the rivalry.
	Seeks exit from rivalry to focus on different threat	- One side decides to exit the rivalry to focus on different challenges or threats—sometimes massive domestic issues, sometimes different geopolitical threats. - One variant can involve an implicit or explicit active partnering or an alliance with the former rival, with formal agreements to settle existing disputes.
	Seeks accommodation or stable peace with rival(s) as a superior or a necessary route to achieving national interests	- This outcome often reflects a recognition by a great power of shifts in the balance of power that demand a degree of retrenchment or an acknowledgement of the rival's position. - This outcome often involves a targeted approach with concessions to stabilize the relationship with at least one main rival and is often employed in the context of multiple rivalries.

More broadly, we derived several leading findings on the nature of success and failure in great power competitions from this research:

- No single type of success or failure typically describes rivalry outcomes. The success or failure of specific countries in rivalries often reflects some combination of these typologies, especially in the modern era.
- Success and failure in great power rivalries can be understood in intrinsic terms along a spectrum of outcomes that begins with two critical factors: preserving basic territorial integrity and promoting domestic stability and dynamism.
- Many rivalry outcomes are temporary rather than permanent. Rivalries only truly end in one of three ways: one side collapses or is conquered, one side decides to give up and grant predominance to the other, or both sides agree to transcend the competition and develop a different relationship. Outcomes short of those results often only set the stage for a more angry and bitter return of the confrontation, such as Germany from 1918 to 1939 and Russia from 1989 to today.
- The dynamism and power-generating capacity of a great power's society is the essential foundation for success under all models.
- Gaining a predominant role in the international system of the period—leading the system's institutions and setting its rules and norms—is also strongly associated with success in rivalries.
- Short of comprehensive victory in war or national collapse, the punitive and coercive imposition of terms is not a common avenue to success in rivalries.
- Excessive ambition and strategic overreach contribute to several varieties of failure.
- Status considerations and competition are often a critical variable in how great powers take stock of in-progress rivalries.
- The highest levels of success for great powers seeking to improve their position but avoid war combine the pursuit of significant degrees of influence and power with mechanisms for system stability.

Finally, we drew several implications for U.S. strategy in the rivalry with China. The most important lesson may be that this contest could well be historically unique, as compared with any earlier case, in terms of its essential character and prospects for success. Historical precedents may not capture the full dynamic of this competition, and any analogy should be treated with caution.

Beyond that conclusion, our analysis produced several findings and insights that are relevant to the U.S. approach to the rivalry:

- Given the nature of China's ambitions, political system, and identity, there appears to be no short-term prospect for seeking outcomes that transcend the rivalry, but such a result could be possible later and should remain the ultimate vision for U.S. strategy.
- Victory or defeat in individual battles or campaigns is not likely to determine the outcome of the rivalry.

- The United States will be best served by starting with the foundations of national power and dynamism—domestic societal dynamism and territorial security in all its forms—and building outward from there. An effective mix of societal characteristics and related sources of advantage form the basis for all forms of success and the essential safeguard against most types of failure.
- Working to shape the international system, in normative as well as institutional and material terms, is a critical strategic priority.
- International legitimacy, acquired and preserved in a variety of ways, is important to rivalry outcomes.
- In the pursuit of success in this rivalry, overreach in various forms—geographic, military, or financial—will be self-defeating.
- Relative to many historical rivalries, there would appear to be limits on how badly the United States can fail in the competition with China, at least in terms of the most essential U.S. interests and the bilateral contest for power and influence. The rivalry does not appear to be subject to the most catastrophic forms of failure that confronted earlier great powers, and its scale and economic and technological sophistication make decline to middle power status highly unlikely.

We suggest a three-part framework for conceptualizing the U.S. rivalry with China. The first component is to manage the ongoing rivalry on a persistent basis and to identify measures of success. The second is to identify the requirements for what we term a *tipping point* in the rivalry—a broad period during which the outcome seems clear even though the contest continues. Finally, the third component is to lay the groundwork for a long-term transformation of U.S.-China relations that would transcend the rivalry, understanding that it could take decades.

Such transformative success in rivalries occurs when a great power convinces its rival to seek its objectives in ways that do not threaten international peace or the domestic security of others. This is the ultimate U.S. task in the current rivalry: to persuade an increasingly impatient, prideful, and occasionally belligerent China to pursue its goals and advance its interests in ways that do not pose a threat to U.S. power and interests.¹ Such a transformation can occur when a great power is defeated in war or when a clear gap emerges between its societal capacities and the demands of the competitive paradigm. Such transformation can arise when a great power is forced to acknowledge that the objective national power of a rival is accelerating past its position in ways that cannot be arrested or when the great power sees, or at least hopes for, an alternative path to the rivalry in order to achieve its essential goals.

The U.S. strategy for the rivalry with China can be partly understood as an effort to set the conditions for one or more of those realizations. The most essential steps to achieve such a goal are renewed domestic dynamism combined with a fresh but revised model of global

¹ This report was completed in November 2023, and the terms *current*, *present*, or *today* in this report should be understood as “as of 2023.”

systemic and normative leadership. Over time, the effective pursuit of such an agenda would undermine any faith held by China's leadership that its model and approach were destined to surpass the United States and the West. At the same time, such a strategy must establish routes to alternative conceptions of Chinese success to create the beginnings of a persuasive vision of what accommodation could look like in ways that meet core Chinese interests. Reassuring a rival about the shape of a potential accommodation is an essential component of any transition to a stable peace.

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The Fate of Great Powers in Major Rivalries

The United States, according to official U.S. national security statements and an avalanche of commentary since about 2016, is engaged in a long-term strategic rivalry with China and a lesser—but still critical—rivalry for influence with Russia. Many U.S. strategy documents refer to the concept of *strategic competition*, but the core idea—and increasingly the reality—of these relationships matches the classic historical concept of a *great power rivalry*. These rivalries, especially with China, promise to define U.S. foreign policy and national security challenges for decades.¹ Yet most assessments of these rivalries tend to ignore the critical question of outcomes: What does success or failure in a rivalry look like?

Historically, failure has often had a rather absolute connotation: conquest and occupation by a rival (as with Germany and Japan in 1945), the political fragmentation or collapse of a competitor (such as Austria-Hungary), or even complete annihilation (the destruction of Carthage in the Third Punic War). In the post–World War II (WWII) nuclear era, for most great powers, these outcomes have been ruled out. Instead, the less catastrophic model of the end of the Cold War now informs many discussions of success in rivalry: the systemic decline of one side that leads to its voluntary abandonment of the rivalry. Yet that variety of failure (or success, from a U.S. perspective) may turn out to be relatively rare. In this case, China is more socially and economically dynamic and resilient than the Soviet Union, and it is unlikely to provide an easy off-ramp from the rivalry in the form of a comparable collapse.

However, this leaves U.S. officials in a difficult position. If neither war nor collapse are likely outcomes, it is not clear how U.S. officials should think about how to define success or failure in the rivalry with China.

The literature on rivalries has not traditionally tackled this issue. Scholars have sought to define rivalries, compile lists of bilateral or multilateral relationships that meet the criteria of rivalries, describe the causes of rivalry, and, in a few cases, identify the factors that lead rivals

¹ For a conceptual discussion of great power competition and strategic rivalry, see Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan S. Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard, and Michael Spirtas, *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, RAND Corporation, RR-2726-AF, 2018; and Michael J. Mazarr, *Understanding Competition: Great Power Rivalry in a Changing International Order—Concepts and Theories*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1404-1, March 2022b. For a different RAND researcher view of these issues, see James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, *Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue: Different Challenges, Different Responses*, RAND Corporation, PE-310-A, October 2018.

to de-escalate their disputes. Some of these assessments have considered how rivalries end. But few, if any, have characterized the ultimate fates of the participants in terms of success or failure. Determining the ways in which Israel and Egypt or Britain and France brought their bilateral rivalries to a close, for example, is a different question from whether they emerged from those contests in triumph or defeat.

In this report, we provide insight on that question by seeking to identify historical modes of strategic success and failure in great power rivalries that offer lessons for the United States. We define categories of success and failure (in terms of such variables as control over territory, relative power, victory or defeat in war, legitimacy, and social stability) and offer detailed case studies on specific historical examples associated with both success and failure. We then discuss the implications of the typologies of both kinds of outcomes for the current U.S. situation.

We approached the task through general historical surveys and in-depth case studies. We reviewed general literature on rivalry and great power rise and fall, and we relied in part on extensive work done during the last two years of the first phase of this study.² We assembled a database of 165 rivalries spanning 1816 to 2010, of which 30 represent cases of bilateral rivalries between great powers (some of which were part of larger multipolar contests) and sought to identify categories of success and failure for the participants. We then conducted five case studies of individual great powers seeking success in global competitive terms: China and its tribute system, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prussia, the United Kingdom, and pre-WWII Japan. From this research, we derived specific modes of success and failure, as well as other insights.

We commissioned papers from several scholars as part of this research, two RAND experts and three outside partners, to help inform our thinking about the ways in which great powers pursue success in rivalries. These papers appear in the appendixes and describe how rivalries play out in contests for control of the international system of the time. John Deak surveys the efforts of Austria-Hungary to shape the surrounding European context in ways that offered advantages, or at least avoided major risks, in its rivalries with surrounding powers. Greg Fauerbach discusses Japan's effort to manufacture a "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" to empower its general position and its positional contest with the United States and others. Timothy Heath examines the Chinese tribute system as a source of systemic advantage-seeking. Stacie Goddard explains how Prussia sought advantage in its rivalries by using legitimation strategies to fuel its rise. Joshua Shiffrinson assesses the U.S. post-Cold War strategy in Europe. None of the papers offers a comprehensive treatment of any rivalry; rather, they are studies of strategies for success—approaches that great powers used to gain advantage relative to others and especially to shape the international system of the day.

² The first phase produced the foundational report for the project, Michael J. Mazarr, *The Societal Foundations of National Competitiveness*, RAND Corporation, RR-A499-1, 2022a. The second phase will produce five independent reports, including this one, on various themes generated by the first report.

In conducting this analysis, we had to make an important and tricky distinction. Our focus was on varieties of success and failure in great power rivalries and not on the broader issue of extremely long-term national fates. The process of the United Kingdom's rise and fall over the past 400 years is a comprehensive story of national-societal success and, ultimately, relative decline. Along the way, the United Kingdom has engaged in more time-limited rivalries with specific foes, such as the United States, Germany, and Russia. Some of those rivalries lasted a century or longer; some were briefer. The most intense rivalries dominated national security fears in London, while others were more marginal. The difference between national fates and specific rivalries is also one of scope: Countries rise and fall relative to the global context and community, whereas rivalries, at least in our analytical focus, are bilateral contests with a particular competitor.

In this analysis, we sought to assemble a typology of the ways in which countries succeed or fail in these shorter-term, but sometimes century-long (or more), bilateral rivalries. Yet the distinction frequently blurs. The outcomes of rivalries can decisively shape the longer-term course of a country's rise and fall. The factors that govern the outcomes of rivalries can also determine wider national fates. Focusing on a single rivalry can also be misleading: Countries ought to care, ultimately, about the bigger question of national trajectory, and sometimes success in a specific rivalry is not the determining factor in a country's fundamental fate.

Conceptualizing the Fates of Nations: Defining Success and Failure in Rivalries

Our first task was to approach a question that has preoccupied scholars for decades: defining a strategic rivalry between pairs of great powers. An earlier RAND study reviewed various approaches to the concept and offered several criteria to define a dyadic strategic rivalry.³ Such a situation involves two states with "comparable amounts of national power and influence" that "believe they are engaged in a rivalry," partly through a "perception of mutual hostility and lack of trust." The participants in a rivalry "have an expectation of future competition and, possibly, conflict" and, in more-specific terms, "have actual or perceived contention over specific policy issues that bear on their mutual national interests and objectives and are unable to resolve these disputes." Finally, the participants in an enduring rivalry typically "have some history of conflict, although the frequency and intensity can vary."⁴ Studies

³ Michael J. Mazarr, Samuel Charap, Abigail Casey, Irina A. Chindea, Christian Curriden, Alyssa Demus, Bryan Frederick, Arthur Chan, John P. Godges, Eugene Han, Timothy R. Heath, Logan Ma, Elina Treyger, Teddy Ulin, and Ali Wyne, *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*, RAND Corporation, RR-A456-1, 2021, pp. 6–10.

⁴ Mazarr et al., 2021, p. 10.

of rivalry tend to focus on their sources and conduct rather than on generating broad-based assessments of failure or success for the participants.⁵

An enduring, bilateral strategic rivalry, therefore, is an ongoing contest between two states that view each other as hostile, in part because of a history of contestation and possibly warfare, and disagree over specific issues that engage important interests on both sides. A rivalry is a combination of objective and historically grounded factors, as well as perceptions: If two states cease to think they are engaged in a rivalry, the contest ends.

The next challenge was to define what we mean by success or failure in such contests. A minimal conception—sustaining a state’s sovereign independence—would count almost all countries as successes in rivalries because relatively few have been permanently absorbed into another’s territory. France may have been occupied in 1940, but it eventually gained its freedom and, today, flourishes as a leading diplomatic and economic power. On the other hand, the United Kingdom was part of a coalition that prevailed over its long-term rival Germany in 1945, but its fate from that point on represented something other than unqualified geopolitical success: The United Kingdom lost an empire and continued into a long decline from its status as a leading industrial power. The academic literature, however, has given little attention to these subjects. As the three leading scholars on the issue conclude, “the explicit study of rivalries as generic processes of conflict and cooperation is a relatively recent development,” and “there are still few clues as to why rivalries come and go”—or how they do so in terms of clear typologies.⁶

An assessment of success or failure implies a focus on the *outcomes* of rivalries rather than their conduct or the more-general factors that produce national strength or weakness. Karen Rasler, William Thompson, and Sumit Ganguly suggest two dominant ways in which rivalries can end. The first is when “one or both states in the rivalries lose their competitive status,” which can occur when one side “is defeated decisively and acknowledges defeat,” when “one side acknowledges defeat without war,” or when “one or both sides experiences political-economic exhaustion and/or intensive civil war.” The second broad category occurs when “one or both states cease to be perceived as a threatening enemy.”⁷ Roughly half the cases these scholars reviewed fell into the first category, with one rival defeated, exhausted, or otherwise pressed into a situation of acknowledging defeat.

⁵ See Michael P. Colaresi, Karen Rasler, and William R. Thompson, *Strategic Rivalries in World Politics: Position, Space, and Conflict Escalation*, Cambridge University Press, 2008; Zeev Maoz and Ben D. Mor, *Bound by Struggle: The Strategic Evolution of Enduring International Rivalries*, University of Michigan Press, 2002; and William R. Thompson, “Identifying Rivals and Rivalries in World Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 4, December 2001.

⁶ Karen Rasler, William R. Thompson, and Sumit Ganguly, *How Rivalries End*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, p. 1.

⁷ Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly, 2013, pp. 6–7.

Our review of similar datasets, historical case research, and other analysis led us to a comparable general list. We divided Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly's first category into two subtypes and ended up with the following list of three ways rivalries can end:

1. One rival can defeat, conquer, and/or occupy the other, ending the contest in a comprehensive and unconditional military victory.
2. One of the two contestants can experience domestic collapse, fragmentation, or serious instability that forces it to abandon the rivalry.
3. One or both of the contestants can consciously decide to exit the rivalry, either by admitting defeat or by seeking to transcend their hostility and establishing a new relationship.

These are very broad categories. Moreover, they are types of rivalry *endings* rather than categories of *success and failure* in rivalries. Those two concepts obviously overlap, but understanding success and failure demands somewhat more detail and nuance than simple endings. Still, we used these three types of rivalry endings as the basic organizing framework for our analysis, breaking them down into more specific subtypes of success and failure.

These complexities point to an important decision: Whether to consider interim, sustained forms of status in unresolved rivalries as versions of success. The United States won an ultimate victory in the Cold War in 1989. But before that outcome became obvious, the United States had achieved certain elements of success. It had attained firm status equivalence with the other great power of the time. It was developing a more dynamic domestic engine of competitiveness and what would become a predominant global alignment of power. It built up military power that was capable of deterring large-scale attack on itself or its primary allies. By the 1970s, Washington had worked with Moscow to introduce elements of stability into the rivalry. All of this surely counted as forms of success long before the more complete triumph.

Thinking about success and failure in such persistent ways and identifying the critical threshold in a competition when the long-term outcome seems foreordained are essential elements of any strategic conception of rivalry outcomes. We discuss these themes in more detail below.

Identifying a successful end point of a rivalry is further complicated by the question of when a rivalry actually ends. In many cases, the apparent end of a rivalry turns out to be only a temporary lull, and the rivals return to hostility—meeting again the basic definitions of a rivalry, including the mutual perception of antagonism—within a few years to a few decades. The U.S. experience with the Soviet Union, and later Russia, clearly fits this pattern: A five-decade rivalry seemingly ended in 1989 only to return, gradually, after about 2005. Significant events in 2008 and 2014 led to the return to a highly dangerous and extremely belligerent mutual hostility between the two countries in 2022. On the other hand, some rivalries—such the United States–United Kingdom, the United Kingdom–France, and the United States–Japan—appear to have been permanently transcended. What we mean by an

in progress evaluation of a rivalry, therefore, depends on how final or temporary the conclusion ends up being.

Short-Term Victory in Rivalries Versus Long-Term National Success

As noted, a major difficulty in answering our core research question was distinguishing among varieties of success and failure in enduring rivalries and the more general concept of national rise and decline over centuries or even millennia. In fact, some of the literature on these questions tends to blur the two: Paul Kennedy's famous treatment, for example, discusses the rise and fall of great powers in the context of enduring European rivalries and evaluates them by the relative power they express in that international context.⁸

We examined this tricky question at some length in the first phase of our study, which highlighted some of the difficult judgments that must be made when assigning a label to any national outcome.⁹ The peak of the Netherlands' power during its late 16th and 17th century Golden Age, for example, brought the country into rivalry with other European powers. The Netherlands eventually ceded its role of leading financial and maritime power to the United Kingdom and fell into a secondary position in the European power balance. Yet the Netherlands remained a wealthy, stable, and free country and, today, leads many global indexes on standard of living, technological sophistication, and political stability. However, the Netherlands relies on a collective alliance for its security and would be significantly more at risk if the nation had to provide for its defense alone. Should the Netherlands' fate in the context of the earlier rivalries be counted as an abject failure—a fall from the heights of power—or as the success of a national community? Germany and Japan would be coded as failed in 1945 but as major successes by the 1970s. In other words, the judgment of success and failure can be starkly different when assigned to the outcomes of specific rivalries as opposed to longer-term national dynamism, prosperity, legitimacy, and stability.

We narrowed our focus to assessing varieties of success and failure in rivalries, but the results can be misleading if taken out of the context of more fundamental national fates. This led us to make an initial distinction between two basic types of success and failure: victory or defeat in the rivalry versus long-term national prosperity, dynamism, and security. These two forms of success and failure can even diverge when a rivalry loss includes catastrophic defeat in war, as happened with Germany and Japan in 1945, but the nation goes on to a new period of economic and political vibrancy. Figure 1.1 provides examples of major powers that occupy various components of the resulting outcomes for both short-term and long-term success and failure.

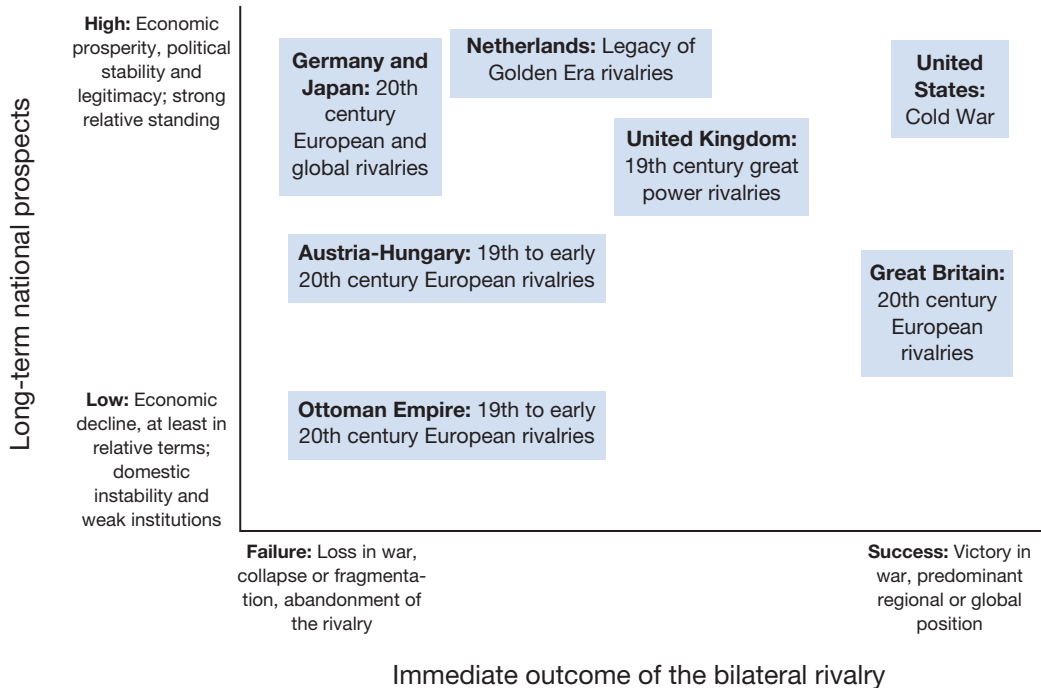
One lesson of history appears to be that the factors that drive countries toward success in a specific rivalry may overlap with, but are ultimately distinct from, the sources of long-

⁸ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Vintage, 1989.

⁹ Mazarr, 2022a, pp. 351–365.

FIGURE 1.1

Categories of Success and Failure in Great Power Rivalries: Short-Term Rivalry Outcome Versus Long-Term Position



term rise and decline. The first phase of our study identified several societal characteristics that underwrite long-term dynamism and competitive position. Countries can prevail in wars or in short-term rivalries without most of those qualities. This line of thought leads to another set of examples: Countries that had the wherewithal for enduring national success but squandered it through disastrous strategic or geopolitical decisions. Athens might be an example because of the combination of its abuse of its Delian League partners and its self-destructive Sicilian expedition. Germany and Japan in the 1930s are an obvious modern case: Both countries were well along the road to the world-leading industrial power positions that they would attain after 1945, only to apply that power first to revisionist agendas that led to their destruction.

These examples suggest at least two lessons. First, marrying victory in rivalries to long-term national dynamism and success appears to demand some pragmatic limits to national ambitions—an avoidance of overreach that would provoke decisive reactions from other countries and nongovernmental actors and undermine the fiscal and political basis for power.

Second, the character of the nation or empire that a great power is competing with can circumscribe the types of success that are available. No stable accommodation was likely with Hitler's Germany, even when stronger deterrent signals were sent from 1938 to 1939. The United States sought avenues to de-escalate with Japan in the late 1930s but was unwilling

to abandon concerns about Japanese aggression in China. In the meantime, Japan's leaders were unwilling to abandon their imperial goals, especially in China, in exchange for a stable rivalry. In this sense, the available varieties of success are partly a product of the *sources and causes* of the rivalry: If the rivalry stems from a virulent and expansionist ideology reflected in an extreme and aggressive regime, that will sharply restrict potential forms of success.

Intrinsic Measures of Success and Failure in Rivalries

After we conceptualized success and failure in narrower and more-fundamental ways, we then turned to identifying criteria for the specific focus of this study: What makes for success and failure in enduring rivalries?

To create a general framework to define success and failure, we relied on the nine factors we identified in the first phase of our study (these are described in Table 1.1). Great powers that achieve success have longevity, can safeguard their essential security, and possess significant external freedom of action. They can protect their social and political choices from external domination or interference. Relative success can be measured through military superiority and economic predominance in such areas as gross domestic product (GDP), GDP per capita, trade volumes, and investment. Relative success also emerges through a country's ideological influence, role in major alignments of power, and technological standing.

The framework is not designed to provide a set of definitive indicators of success but rather to convey the variety of goals that great powers will typically seek. Each of these outcomes would in a real case be measured relative to some goal, whether a minimal conception of territorial security or maximal objectives in regional or global power balances. This list does not mention an important goal for all great powers—status—but it presumes that a country's position in the global hierarchy of the time is a natural by-product of many of these measures. Nor does the framework suggest that these factors are independent of one another: In any rivalry outcome, there will be a significant degree of covariance in the levels of success and failure in the various areas. Considered together, however, they paint a portrait of what success or failure looks like.

By these criteria, success in a rivalry would involve preserving key measures of domestic choice, security, resiliency, and prosperity while at least holding even or gradually overtaking the rival (or pulling away from the rival, if already overtaken) in domains of broad societal power—economic, technological, and cultural. But here, we encountered another complication: What *degree* of relative standing is enough to count as success? Is achieving parity enough? Does success require defeating or overcoming the rival, or can it be measured in purely self-referential terms, such as holding even abroad while advancing at home?

The Cold War provides an interesting example. It is commonplace to say that the United States achieved success in 1989 when the Soviet Union collapsed, its rival formally vanquished. But it might be just as accurate to say that the United States was succeeding by 1980 or 1985: In terms of the criteria in Table 1.1—domestic prosperity and resilience, international influence, economic growth, trade relations, industrial and technological power—there was

TABLE 1.1
Outcome Indicators: Factors to Measure Competitive Success

Indicator of Competitive Success and Advantage	Historical and Current Examples and Metrics
Longevity in terms of long-term socioeconomic and geopolitical resilience that maintains national identity over an extended period and promotes extended cultural and social influence	• Trends in measures of national power • Collapse or surrender by rival • Long-term, indirect, and diffuse social, cultural, or political influence
Sovereign ability to protect the safety and prosperity of citizens against capabilities or threats of other states, nonstate actors, and systemic risks	• Power to prevent large-scale territorial aggression against homeland • Ability to prevent harassment or disruption of society short of war • Self-determination in domestic political and social choices and preferences
Geopolitical freedom of action in terms of the ability to make free and unconstrained sovereign decisions and to take actions in the international system to the greatest degree that relative power will allow	• Absence of coercive control by regional or global hegemon • Self-sufficiency in materials and factors necessary for freedom of action
Military advantage or dominance, locally or globally, and the ability to project power	• Global military dominance, either generally (e.g., Rome, post-Cold War United States) or in specific domains (e.g., UK maritime dominance) • Ability to project power from a distance
Leadership of or membership in predominant alignments of military and geopolitical power	• Modern treaty-based alliances, multilateral or bilateral • Less formal security relationships
Predominant economic strength—globally, within a region, or within one or more industries	• Total or per capita GDP • Share of global trade, investment, or research in critical industries
Strong to predominant position in global trade, investment, and capital markets (relative to size of GDP and other factors)	• Role in regional or global trade networks (Egypt, Rome, United Kingdom, United States) • Dominance of national currency • Predominant power in economic institutions
Strong to predominant position in ideological and paradigmatic categories and global narratives and norms, attractive power, and international institutions and standards	• Cultural influence • Alignment with leading global norms and values • Leadership of international organizations and norm-setting processes
Strong or leading position in frontier technology; leading or dominant role in key emerging industrial sectors	• Domestic capabilities and industries in leading industries of the era • Measures of relative technological standing • Proportion of research and development spending in key industries

SOURCE: Adapted from Mazarr, 2022a, p. 18.

no risk of losing parity with the Soviet Union. The United States was preserving its security; absent a nuclear war, the U.S. homeland faced no immediate risk of destruction from the Soviet Union. By these criteria, it would appear that one version of success in a rivalry would

be to reach an equilibrium at which the basic criteria for absolute success are met and the relative criteria are no worse than equivalent.

This analysis also raises the question of what type or degree of failure is truly possible for a country of the United States' size, geographic advantages, and military power. Even scenarios in which the United States lost large degrees of international influence, for example, could still involve a high standard of living and a high degree of safety for the United States. In historical terms, the Netherlands is a successful country, although, in relative international terms, its success waned after its Golden Age period; Britain failed in its rivalry with the United States yet remains relatively prosperous and very secure in comparison with many eras of its history. Geographic factors and the U.S. role in the nuclear era mean that the United States today cannot fail as France did in 1815 (or even 1870) or as Germany did in 1945. Just as there may be limits to the kinds of success that are available to great powers today, at least for some, there appear to be constraints on how badly they can fail. We return to this theme in Chapter 3.

One pattern of great power interaction that produces a version of success or failure that we did not include is what might be considered defeat and the imposition of terms in war: A loss in a major battle or in a long-term war that puts a nation in the position of needing to surrender or to otherwise agree to unfavorable and punitive terms. A classic example of this model might be the end of World War I (WWI), specifically Germany's defeat in 1918. Germany was not conquered or fully occupied, but it accepted defeat and was subject to punitive terms in the Treaty of Versailles and had Allied troops on parts of its territory for a time. Another example might be France during the 1870–1871 war with Prussia: Battlefield reverses forced territorial concessions and other punitive terms on a beleaguered French government. In non-great power terms, Iraq's defeat in 1991 may count as another example of the pattern: Iraq's military was crushed by U.S. forces and was forced from Kuwait, although the United States stopped short of the goal of conquest. In some cases, such as the Iraqi one, this pattern can be restricted to a single battle or short series of battles that last from one week to a few weeks—an operation or a campaign rather than a war.

Ultimately, however, we judged that this pattern may be so limited in scope that it does not count as a variety of final success or failure in a bilateral rivalry. Countries can endure a temporary loss that does not end a rivalry (such as in the French-Prussian case). In fact, that pattern is the most common: Germany's defeat in 1918 did not end its rivalry with Britain, France, and Russia. In some ways, that humiliation only set the stage for an even more bitter and absolute confrontation within a generation. The pattern of defeat and the imposition of terms in war, therefore, does not count as a variety of success or failure in rivalries per se, but it does raise at least two important questions for the United States today, to which we will return in Chapter 3.

Rivalry Outcome Type 1: Comprehensive Victory or Defeat

After we established a conceptual baseline for thinking about success and failure, we then developed portraits of individual varieties of success and failure. To do this, we relied on a

review of databases of great power rivalries, general historical research, five in-depth case studies prepared by co-authors of this report, and dialogues among the co-authors. We used the three basic categories noted above—total defeat or conquest, political or social collapse or fragmentation, and voluntary exit—as the organizing framework. Within each category, we identified several subtypes of success and failure. This larger resulting list is conceptually distinct but not mutually exclusive (with the partial exception of the first subtype, which involves a comprehensive victory of one side). In fact, some subtypes frequently appear together, such as societal and systemic success (or failure), but they are distinct in that no subtype is *necessarily* tied to any other: A nation could experience one subtype in isolation from the others.¹⁰

The first type of rivalry ending is what we term *comprehensive victory or defeat*. In this outcome—which is common in the historical record—the nation that prevails wins an unconditional political-military victory that leads to the utter destruction and/or occupation of the defeated nation.

This pattern first emerged from our review of academic literature on great power rivalries. We built on a dataset of great power rivalries and their stakes by cataloging how each rivalry ended and whether key areas of competition between the United States and its rivals today made an appearance. We began with a list of 165 bilateral rivalries from 1816 to 2010 drawn from William Thompson and David Dreyer’s *Handbook of International Rivalries*.¹¹ We then used the handbook’s case narratives to code additional features of each rivalry, specifically

- whether each rivalry ended with a formal settlement
- whether each rivalry ended when one or more rivals underwent leadership transitions
- whether each rivalry’s end involved the use of force (by a rival or another party).

Appendix F lists these cases. We also identified a narrower list of 30 bilateral rivalries in which both rivals were major powers, as defined by the Correlates of War Project’s State System Membership dataset.¹² We coded all of the mentioned features for these rivalries and coded how each rivalry ended according to our typology of rivalry outcomes. This list of major power rivalries can be found in Appendix G. Table 1.2 offers a more-limited set of example cases across all varieties of success and failure.

¹⁰ James Lacey has argued that many historical cases suggest that “major shocks to the global system” play an important role in ending rivalries (James Lacey, “Introduction,” in James Lacey, ed., *Great Strategic Rivalries: From the Classical World to the Cold War*, paperback ed., Oxford University Press, 2020b, pp. 17, 20–21. Some of the dynamics that are involved in each of the seven varieties of success and failure involve such shocks.

¹¹ William R. Thompson and David Dreyer, eds., *Handbook of International Rivalries, 1494–2010*, CQ Press, 2013.

¹² Correlates of War Project, “State System Membership (v2016),” dataset, 2017. The datasets were downloaded via the R package detailed in Steven V. Miller, “[peacesciencer]: An R Package for Quantitative Peace Science Research,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 39, No. 6, November 2022.

TABLE 1.2

Great Power Rivalry Outcomes: Selected Cases

Case	Outcome
China-Russia (1816–1949)	The long-term rivalry changes form with the rise of China's communist regime in 1949; the rivalry eventually reignites.
Britain-China (1839–1900)	The rivalry ends after the Boxer Rebellion deprives China of political coherence; eventually, both countries face a common rival in Japan.
Japan–United States (1898–1945)	The rivalry ends with Japan's defeat, occupation, and the transformation of its government.
China–United States (postwar phase: 1949–1972)	China's ideological commitment to Maoism ebbs; both countries see value in alignment against the USSR. This is only a temporary accommodation.
Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Empire (1494–1908)	The rivalry gradually ebbs; Ottoman influence in the Balkans declines, and both countries face more-pressing challenges and threats.
Ottoman Empire–Russia (1668–1918)	WWI weakens the Ottoman Empire and destroys the Russian monarchy.
Britain-Germany (two phases: 1898–1918 and 1934–1945)	In both phases, Germany provokes and is defeated in a major war; the second phase ends the rivalry semipermanently.

SOURCES: Features basic data on rivalries and rivalry endings from Thompson, 2001, and Thompson and Dreyer, 2013. More detailed data are provided in Appendixes A and B.

When we sought to categorize how each rivalry ended, we noticed that there was not much variety: As cataloged in Appendix G, 84 percent of great power rivalries ended with one regime being removed by force by one or more rivals. The end of these rivalries generally involved comprehensive defeat, temporary or permanent, which led to the conquest or occupation of one of the contestants.¹³ Thus, this outcome type leads the historical record.¹⁴

¹³ We initially applied an additional lens to the dataset to categorize how states succeeded or failed in specific policy areas within their rivalries. The plan was to code which areas of competition were present in a list of major power rivalries and then to use those codes to construct a typology that laid out modes of success and failure for each area of competition in strategic rivalries. We chose policy areas that RAND researchers had identified in earlier work as central in U.S.-China competition. However, we found that several policy areas barely appeared in our list of rivalries (such as influence in international institutions). And although other policy areas did appear in the rivalries in our list (such as the alignment of key countries), we judged that studying how each rival succeeded or failed in these separate policy areas would require resources beyond the scope of this project. We realized that the cost-benefit ratio of this approach would have been too high. One challenge in using this approach was that key areas of competition between the United States and its rivals today—such as international institutions and emerging technologies—have few precedents in historical cases of great power competition.

¹⁴ It is striking, for example, to review Table 1.2 in Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly (2013, p. 7) and note how many modern rivalries have an end point that equates to the conclusion of a major war—notably 1918 or 1943–1945.

The core aspect of the end of this type of rivalry is the utter defeat, conquest, and/or occupation of one rival by the other(s). This involves either the destruction of the defeated party as a political entity or its temporary governance by the victor in some sort of governing structure. In some cases, the defeated party does recover and return to significant international influence, such as the United Kingdom's rise in the centuries after its 1066 defeat at the Battle of Hastings or China's long-term rise to prominence after its 13th century defeat by the Mongols. As the description suggests, this type of rivalry is grounded in military performance, typically across an extended conflict rather than a single military engagement.

The apotheosis of this rivalry type is the Third Punic War (149–146 BCE), during which Rome laid siege to Carthage, conquered the city-state, sold the surviving inhabitants into slavery, razed much of the city to the ground, and erected a new Roman city on the ruins. The most recent modern example of this type in a great power context is WWII and the defeat and occupation of a devastated Germany and Japan. The conduct of the conquering nation changed dramatically over this long history, but the basic defining elements are consistent across these cases.

This type of rivalry conclusion—although historically common and the most extreme of all outcomes—has become less frequent and less relevant in the modern era. This is true for several reasons. In simple quantitative terms, the long-term decline in the incidence of great power interstate war has offered fewer examples of such comprehensive success.¹⁵ The evolution of statecraft and the normative basis for legitimacy have meant that outright wars of conquest appear to be generally less feasible as routes to national power than they were in earlier centuries. Evolving techniques for popular resistance have increased the costs of conquest.¹⁶ Geography is also a barrier: Efforts to attack, subdue, and conquer distant foes are fantastically expensive endeavors, and many empires and great powers that have tried to do so have failed. Perhaps most of all, in the nuclear age, the full conquest of a nuclear-armed foe has become an essentially impossible proposition. All great powers today possess nuclear weapons or have an alliance with a nuclear-armed state. There is a real question of whether this variety of success or failure remains on the table for any great, and most middle, powers.

This broad type generates two forms of success and failure that are listed in Table 1.3. These forms overlap significantly, and some cases sit at the boundary between them, such as France after 1815 or Germany after 1918. The second type of rivalry ending—a decisive victory or defeat in major war without conquest—is designed to illustrate the potential for a major power to broadly defeat another in political-military terms, even if that major power's army does not conquer and impose an occupation on the losing side. In some cases, such outcomes only impose a temporary lull in the rivalry and can even serve to spur a more virulent

¹⁵ Thomas S. Szayna, Angela O'Mahony, Jennifer Kavanagh, Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Tova C. Norlen, and Phoenix Voorhies, *Conflict Trends and Conflict Drivers: An Empirical Assessment of Historical Conflict Patterns and Future Conflict Projections*, RAND Corporation, RR-1063-A, 2017.

¹⁶ Alex Weisiger "Victory Without Peace: Conquest, Insurgency, and War Termination," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2014.

TABLE 1.3

Varieties of Success and Failure: Comprehensive Victory or Defeat

Variety	Component Characteristics	Examples
1. A total victory or loss in total war with the losing side conquered and/or occupied	• The failing side is utterly defeated in war and is partially or completely occupied. • One side's position in the global or regional hierarchy is temporarily or permanently altered.	• Carthage in the Third Punic War • Germany and Japan in WWII • The U.S. Confederate states in 1865
2. A decisive victory or defeat in a major war without conquest	• The failing side suffers comprehensive defeat in a major war that imposes severe terms and essentially ends the rivalry for a time or permanently if the defeat changes larger political relationships.	• France in the Napoleonic Wars • Germany in WWI

new phase. Germany after 1918 is the paradigmatic example of such a result. But the outcome can theoretically lead to the long-term success or failure of one side and deserves to be considered as a distinct variety of success and failure.

Rivalry Outcome Type 2: Change or Collapse of a Government or Regime or Fragmentation of Political Coherence

A second pattern that recurs in the historical record is a variety of success or failure that could be called collapse or, more generally, a change of government that undermines one side's will to continue the rivalry. This pattern can involve the disintegration of a government or a nation or a more limited, but still significant, change of ruling elements that decisively shifts national strategy.

This rivalry outcome can emerge in various ways. It can entail a sudden, disruptive, and sometimes violent change of government, with the new regime taking a dramatically different approach to the rivalry and perhaps abandoning it. The result can be lasting political instability that shapes the prospects of the nation in any rivalries that do continue.¹⁷ An example of this pattern might be post-Napoleonic France, during which the return of the Bourbon monarchy reshaped France's approach toward its neighbors and led the country into the Concert of Europe. This began a process of fundamental rethinking of France's alignments, which would eventually lead to alliances with former rivals. As already noted, this case of France also reflects comprehensive defeat in war and, thus, counts as an example of comprehensive loss in war as much as a change of government: France had lost a war, and

¹⁷ Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly (2013, pp. 7–9) discuss various forms of governmental change or shifts in policy that produce end points to rivalries.

major portions of the country were occupied by a multinational force of 150,000 troops for three years.¹⁸

This pattern can also take the form of more widespread collapse or the fragmentation of the political entity in which the existing polity, whether empire or nation-state, disintegrates and ceases to be an actor on the global stage, although its component parts become new geopolitical entities. Very often the victims of such dissolution are multiethnic empires with significant and inherent dissipative energies; collapse is often caused by nationalist uprisings. Major war is often a proximate cause of the fragmentation, but it need not be. This is a relatively common avenue to success or failure in modern rivalries. Examples include the implosion of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires after WWI and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union after 1989. The remaining political entities can renew rivalries at a later date: Turkey inherited some of the Ottoman empire's geopolitical disputes, and Russia has rekindled a rivalry with the West. But at least for a time, the political fragmentation or changes bring an end to the contest.

This type of outcome, therefore, can overlap with and reflect elements of the third general outcome type: the voluntary exit from a rivalry by one side. A change in government or the partial fragmentation of a political entity can lead the new or beleaguered regime to give up a rivalry in ways that become a voluntary exit. The distinction between the two outcomes is that collapse or fragmentation involves a dramatic, destabilizing political change that ruins one side's ability to continue the rivalry, whereas voluntary exit refers to cases in which one side, for more considered strategic reasons, simply decides to leave the rivalry. Many cases will sit somewhere near the boundary of these two outcomes. Either way, a rivalry ending that involves collapse or fragmentation has several main elements:

- It involves a change in governmental rule or stability.
- It must include some change in the country's approach to a rivalry.
- It must be somewhat lasting, in the sense that the regime change cannot be momentary, with a rapid return to the former regime or an established approach to the rivalry.

One common route to this outcome is overreach in national ambitions, which we categorize as a mechanism that generates success or failure rather than as a type of outcome. Countries that assume an excessive geopolitical burden often court exactly such a failed outcome, wherein government change or collapse or fragmentation undermines a country's capacity to continue the rivalry.

Steven Ward has argued that the causal dynamic can flow both ways: Beginning to fail in a rivalry can generate such fragmentation. On the basis of such cases as modern Spain, he argues that "relative decline—conceptualized as eroding national status—can produce dis-

¹⁸ Christine Haynes, *Our Friends the Enemies: The Occupation of France After Napoleon*, Harvard University Press, 2018.

integrative political dynamics and contribute to domestic conflict.”¹⁹ This is true because “eroding national status reduces the attractiveness of the state as a center for collective identification, potentially contributing to conflict between distinct ethnic, political, or other groups within the state.”²⁰ Such conflict, Ward argues, arises in part because domestic groups respond to decline in different ways, either by reducing affiliation or by seeking “the restoration of the state’s status and the defense of the dominant national identity.”²¹ The beginning of failure in a rivalry can thus produce a spiral of negative outcomes, from which relative decline causes domestic instability that further weakens the nation.

We derived two subtypes of success and failure from this general category of rivalry endings, summarized in Table 1.4.

Rivalry Outcome Type 3: Voluntary Exit

The third and final general type of rivalry outcome involves a decision by one or both contestants to abandon the rivalry, either permanently or temporarily. Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly developed a theory of how rivalries can end in noncoercive cases that informed our understanding of this type. Some combination of several variables can lead to movement toward a rivalry resolution: internal and external shocks, changing expectations about the rival, the emergence of policy entrepreneurs on one or both sides who are determined to transcend the rivalry, and pressure from third parties. If this movement toward resolution is met with initial reciprocity from the other side and the momentum is reinforced over time, the

TABLE 1.4

Varieties of Success and Failure: Political Collapse or Fragmentation

Variety	Component Characteristics	Examples
1. The fragmentation or division of political unity on one side	• One side in a bilateral or multilateral rivalry loses political coherence and fragments into smaller entities. • The shock of the fragmentation, plus the smaller geopolitical power of the new components, imposes loss.	• Ottoman Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empire after WWI • Soviet Union at end of the Cold War
2. A radical change in government or a capacity for governance that undermines the ability of one side to continue the rivalry	• One side has a dramatic and comprehensive change in its governing structures or quality through some form of revolution or turmoil that undermines its will or ability to continue the rivalry.	• France after the Napoleonic Wars • Decay in the quality of Spanish Habsburg rule during period of decline

¹⁹ Steven Ward, “Decline and Disintegration: National Status Loss and Domestic Conflict in Post-Disaster Spain,” *International Security*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Spring 2022, p. 91.

²⁰ Ward, 2022, p. 91.

²¹ Ward, 2022, p. 91.

rivalry can end.²² Although their model could unfold in ways other than the type proposed here, it broadly matches the mechanism of accommodation in this variety of success.

Voluntary exit is the most diverse and complex of the three types and has several important subtypes that are summarized below.

Acceptance of Middle- or Secondary-Power Status

In one variant of voluntary exit, one of the great powers can experience a relative decline in power that is so obvious and significant that it decides to abandon the rivalry, at least in the sense of trying to maintain equivalent status to its rival. The country's leaders come to accept the idea that, henceforth, it will seek to preserve its interests as a middle power or at least something that is less than a comprehensive rival of its former adversary. This pattern typically emerges among countries that have receded from predominant status and are recalibrating their ambitions. As a result, those countries make a conscious decision to default to middle-power status (or an implicit equivalent, at least in terms of its traditional rival), sometimes in one region at a time and sometimes more comprehensively. This counts, in essence, as a victory for the other side, although the country shifting status aspirations may not see it as a defeat.

The classic example of this pattern is the United Kingdom's step-down from global primacy after WWII. This is not the same as the United Kingdom's earlier decision to accommodate a rising United States, which we will classify under the subtype of seeking more formal accommodation and eventually a stable peace in a rivalry (see "Seeking Accommodation: Pursuing a Stable Peace" later in this chapter). In this example, the transition was gradual. At the outset, many British officials would have denied that they were accepting something less than great power status. The country eventually accepted middle-power status only after the post-WWII anticolonial surge deprived it of key possessions (notably India) and after the Suez debacle of 1956 made its standing relative to the United States and the Soviet Union clear. The United Kingdom's willingness to accept a lesser status had been evolving for some time, and the story of the contest of views on this process within the government and in private circles is complex.²³ Moreover, the country's final decision to accept a less prominent role was not so much a decision to abandon a rivalry as to reconceptualize its role within one: firmly joining the United States in the emerging Cold War. Still, a former global hegemon's choice to take on a lesser role matches the essential pattern described by this subtype of rivalry endings. Other examples that fit this general pattern include the Netherlands, Sweden, and, in a slightly different degree, modern France.

This pattern has several leading characteristics. One of the contestants in a rivalry decides to abandon some degree of its pretensions to great power status. The contestant retrenches its

²² Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly, 2013, pp. 10–30.

²³ There is extensive literature on this, including Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905*, Princeton University Press, 2011; and Kori Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony*, Harvard University Press, 2017.

security ambitions, global presence, influence-seeking, and the areas in which it challenges its primary rival. This shift can come about in many ways: A typical example is a recognition that unavoidable factors of scale and power simply do not allow one side to continue in a rivalry. Countries that have multiple rivals also sometimes see a need to scale back their ambitions. Shifting domestic political winds can also lead a nation to accept a humbler role.

A precondition for this type of ending is the abandonment of any messianic self-conception on the part of the great power. The nation that walks away from a rivalry in this scenario, in whole or in part, must be pragmatic, recognize the limits of its power, and likely surrender any extreme forms of ambition that are grounded in exceptionalist views of its role in the world. The United Kingdom, for example, although it retained colonial possessions even as it began to retrench in the 19th century, gave up on any vision of its power dominating the world.

Realignment to Meet Different Threats

Nations may also choose to exit a rivalry when they decide that a new or different threat requires urgent attention and that the continuation of the current rivalry would interfere with meeting the other threat. In some cases, this can involve an alliance, with two countries shifting from being militarized rivals to confirmed partners facing off against other threats. In some cases, the abandoned rival experiences this as a more significant form of success, in the sense that the country exiting the rivalry typically has to make concessions, or at least end any active harassment and hostility, in order to achieve the desired outcome. But if properly handled, this outcome can constitute a success for both or all parties.

We are defining this subtype of rivalry outcome as sparked by a response to other external threats. Great powers sometimes exit a rivalry because they need to attend to domestic problems or challenges, but we would count that as a version of the next subtype: seeking accommodations in rivalries out of self-interest. The two justifications can overlap and blur, but, for the purposes of this typology, *realignment* is an externally justified outcome and *accommodation* a broader judgment about the value of ending a rivalry.

This subtype does presume that both sides agree to put the rivalry on hold; when one side initiates the idea of a temporary exit, it receives a positive response from the rival or rivals. Eventually, what emerges is a sort of agreed truce, in which both or all sides are glad for the opportunity to focus on other geopolitical threats.

Despite the degree of mutuality, this may be the most brittle and temporary of the success and failure varieties in part because it is the most transactional. It falls short of the more complete transcendence of a rivalry that we will describe for the seeking accommodation subtype and involves a more calculated and transactional willingness to downplay a specific competition, often only for a time. Realignment relies on the judgment that a feared or resented rival must be bracketed for the time being. It does not presume that the two sides have transcended the deep sources of security concerns, mistrust, and competition that sparked the rivalry in the first place. There are many cases of such realignment reversing itself at a later date, such as the U.S.-China relationship since about 2013.

There are many examples of this subtype in the historical record in part because the fluid alliance dynamics of multipolar European power balances led to the constant reconceptualization of rivals. UK-Russian relations before WWI display aspects of this pattern. More recently, the U.S.-China rapprochement from 1972 to 1979 also reflects this pattern, with both sides deciding on a truce to focus on the Soviet threat and domestic reform.

Seeking Accommodation: Pursuing a Stable Peace

The third and final subtype of voluntary exit occurs when one or more participants in a rivalry decide that their interests will be best served by some form of geopolitical truce that, at least temporarily, settles the rivalry. However, these participants do not necessarily accept middle-power status. In this subtype, one or both rivals seek an accommodation for reasons other than a shared threat, such as a sense that the cost of the rivalry is bankrupting the country. These accommodations can be part of a general process of retrenchment, although the degree of reduction in global commitments and role can vary significantly.²⁴

Multiple cases reflect this potential route to success. The earlier phases of the United Kingdom's rethinking of its global role—the decision to shift security burdens in the Americas and, eventually, other regions to the United States—count as a leading case. As the scholar Kathleen Burk explains, “from the late nineteenth century on, Great Britain repeatedly tried to convince the United States to act as a world power, which meant taking on the necessary responsibilities.”²⁵ This then became “the only case in known history in which one Great Power, or empire, handed on the torch of supremacy to another without a battle between them having been fought.”²⁶

The mutual accommodation between the United States and China in the 1970s could be viewed as a variant of this strategy, in which the United States chose to exit (at least temporarily) the rivalry with one of the two dominant communist powers to strengthen its hand in the remaining contest. To achieve this, Washington took powerful steps to accommodate Beijing's interests: shifting diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China (PRC), ending its security alliance with Taiwan, and withdrawing troops from the island. This case also reflects the realignment variety of success, reinforcing the idea that historical examples can fit the elements of more than one category.

Another relevant case is the transformation of Franco-British relations in the decades after 1815, which moved from centuries of recurring warfare and persistent rivalry to a sometimes grudging, but still sustained, geopolitical alignment that is now enshrined in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership and multiple bilateral security arrange-

²⁴ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts*, Cornell University Press, 2018; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, “Partnership or Predation? How Rising States Contend with Declining Great Powers,” *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 1, Summer 2020b.

²⁵ Kathleen M. Burk, “A New World in Dispute: The British Empire Versus the American Empire,” in James Lacey, ed., *Great Strategic Rivalries: From the Classical World to the Cold War*, paperback ed., Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 431.

²⁶ Burk, 2020, p. 431.

ments. This process created a resilient alignment that has lasted more than a century. As one modern history review noted, the Franco-British relationship moved to a new level through the historic Lancaster House Treaties signed in November 2010 by Paris and London.²⁷ These agreements underwrite a comprehensive bilateral relationship built on pillars of defense, security, and nuclear technology cooperation. Despite the ups and downs of Brexit, both countries have managed to forge an ambitious shared agenda that covers joint equipment projects, research and technology, nuclear cooperation, military exercises, and joint operations. Regions where the United Kingdom and France cooperate include Mali (Operation Barkhane), the Middle East (as part of the wider Global Coalition against Daesh), and Estonia (under NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence).

The same experts conclude that “the UK-France defense and security relationship is broad, deep, and of significant mutual benefit based on a shared history and set of values that each nation is committed to upholding, regardless of the political climate.”²⁸ To some degree, this reorientation could be seen as an example of the previous subtype—realignment in the face of a new threat (Germany)—but the shift had broader justifications and scope.

The post-1815 rivalries in continental Europe offer an example of a multipolar version of this subtype, in which several great powers sought collective accommodation. In the Congress of Vienna, major European powers put into place what historian Paul Schroeder has called “political equilibrium.” Rivalries did not permanently end, but the continued competition was regulated and restrained to a plateau. The participants in the system viewed as a form of success, even if temporary, a sort of competitive equilibrium in the rivalries that none expected to end any time soon. Schroeder explains that

[o]versimplified, political equilibrium meant a balance of satisfactions, a balance of rights and obligations and a balance of performance and payoffs, rather than a balance of power. A critical component of this variety of success and failure relates to that core defining quality of status equivalence—and the great difficulty in achieving it.²⁹

More specifically, Schroeder defined such an equilibrium as “the enjoyment of stability, peace, and guaranteed rights”; freedom from “threats and isolation”; the recognition of a great power’s “legitimate interests, sphere of influence, and the right to a voice in general affairs” by its rivals; and, “especially for the great powers, assurance of equality in rank, status, and dignity, even if not in power. Whenever these conditions were believed not to prevail, statesmen would claim that the balance was upset.”³⁰ As this example suggests, power-balancing con-

²⁷ Sean Monaghan and Pierre Morcos, “UK-France Defense and Security Relations Need a Reboot,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 23, 2021.

²⁸ Monaghan and Morcos, 2021.

²⁹ Paul W. Schroeder, “The Nineteenth Century System: Balance of Power or Political Equilibrium?” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, April 1989, p. 143.

³⁰ Schroeder, 1989, p. 143.

tinues under this subtype of success or failure in rivalries, but it is bounded and constrained by accompanying agreements, explicit as well as implicit, and sometimes by the geopolitical and technological realities of the time.³¹

If countries are to achieve these results, such accommodations demand a stable, if temporary, resolution of two of the most complex and explosive issues in any rivalry: the status ambitions and fears of the contestants. Achieving *equivalent status*—a country's recognized position in the social hierarchy of world politics—is a leading criterion for success in competitions.³² For some regimes, achieving equivalent status can become an obsession.³³ When the measurements of status are ambiguous or contested, status dissatisfaction or discrepancy can become a major cause of war as states undertake aggressive actions to claim their perceived rightful place in the hierarchy.³⁴ This factor is an important precondition for a stable accommodation: If both or all participants in the rivalry are satisfied in the mutual status relationship, this satisfaction can underwrite a stable equilibrium for an extended period. If one power has major unresolved status discrepancies, this dissatisfaction will make it very challenging to preserve a stable equilibrium for long.

During the 20th century, several powerful states were not content with such a limited variety of success. Germany to a degree from the 1890s to 1914 (depending on the accepted historiography), Germany from 1938 to 1939, and Japan from 1931 to 1941 would not accept

³¹ This was one of the recognitions of European states when they formed the Concert of Powers after 1815: As the historian Richard Elrod put it, the “[b]alance of power politics—the politics of confrontation—generated intolerable international tensions, produced increasingly serious armed conflicts, and inspired progressively extravagant plans of aggression. It neither maintained peace nor preserved the independence of sovereign states” (Richard B. Elrod, “The Concert of Europe: A Fresh Look at an International System,” *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 2, January 1976, pp. 161–162).

³² The literature on status is immense. For a review essay that describes the importance of the issue as a form of geopolitical success, see Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “The Status of Status in World Politics,” *World Politics*, Vol. 73, No. 2, April 2021, p. 361. Richard Ned Lebow has written that “[t]he need for self-esteem is universal,” and the resulting concern for standing and recognition is a major driver of international politics (Richard Ned Lebow, “Fear, Interest, and Honour: Outlines of a Theory of International Relations,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 3, May 2006, p. 431). Jonathan Renshon argues that status is “more even than the ‘everyday currency of international relations,’ because status is also the end goal for political leaders, many of whom are plainly obsessed with investing in, seizing, and defending it” (Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*, Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 1). Renshon argues that a major cause of conflict is “status dissatisfaction,” a state’s concern that its level of status does not match its expectations, needs, or ambitions. William Wohlforth agrees on the dangers of “status dissonance,” the difference between the reality and the self-generated aspirations of major powers (William C. Wohlforth, “Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War,” *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1, January 2009, p. 49).

³³ On the China and Russia cases, see Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Spring 2010; and Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy*, Yale University Press, 2019.

³⁴ Charles F. Doran, Kim Quaile Hill, and Kenneth R. Mladenka, “Threat, Status Disequilibrium, and National Power,” *British Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, April 1979, p. 39.

a stable equilibrium in terms of accommodations on status claims.³⁵ This is partly because those countries believed that they were denied the core defining requirement of accommodation: true equivalent status with the other great power(s) of the day. It was also partly because of the militaristic or expansionistic ideologies that emerged within these powers, especially during the 1930s.

The Cold War before the Soviet collapse, at least during the period of détente, also had certain elements of accommodation. Although both sides continued to fear war, the nuclear and broader military balances were such that resolving the dispute in military terms, as a conscious strategy for success, was ruled out. Each side recognized the other as the great power counterpart of the time (or *superpower* in Cold War vernacular). Bitter competition continued through technology investments, proxy wars, intelligence campaigns, and many other forms, but a group of senior officials accumulated in Washington and Moscow, some with extensive experience in diplomacy and deep relationships with rival officials. Each side, therefore, had achieved an interim form of success, even if unsatisfying and perilous.

As these examples suggest, the degree of accommodation sought by the great power initiating this strategy can vary widely. In some cases, the accommodation turned out to be largely instrumental and temporary, at least from the perspective of one of the parties. At the other end of the spectrum, as Charles Kupchan has documented, the most extensive cases of accommodation and realignment fully transcend the rivalries and can establish the basis for lasting friendships. Kupchan has described how enemies become friends through a four-stage process: accommodation, mutual restraint, social integration of the two societies, and the development of new narratives and identities. In the most successful cases, such as the rise of the European Union, these stages can create zones of stable peace that fully transcend old antagonisms.³⁶

This subtype has several leading characteristics. It generally reflects a great power's recognition of shifts in the balance of power that demand a degree of retrenchment or acknowledgement of the rival's position, either in the main rivalry or more generally. Accommodation often involves a targeted approach, with concessions to stabilize the relationship with at least one main rival, and is often employed in the context of multiple rivalries. One variant can involve implicit or explicit partnering or an active alliance with the former rival; in the process, a formal agreement to settle a quarrel, such as a border dispute, can be involved.

As the examples listed above suggest, when accommodation is pursued effectively, it generally counts as a form of success. Well-executed examples of accommodation allow a great power to meet its essential security needs with the lower profile dictated by its situation. The

³⁵ On the debates over whether Germany counts as a true aggressive revisionist that consciously undertook an expansionist war, see Keir A. Lieber, "The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Fall 2007; and Jack Snyder and Keir A. Lieber, "Defensive Realism and the 'New' History of World War I," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Summer 2008.

³⁶ Charles A. Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

United Kingdom extended its global influence in significant ways through its early accommodation of U.S. power, thereby bringing on board a partner that sought outcomes in the international order that were often in line with the United Kingdom's interests and that eventually came to the country's rescue in WWII. The ability of the United Kingdom and France to transcend their rivalry and to reach mutual accommodation did not prevent two world wars but in Crimea, during WWI, and even in select ways during WWII, their alignment paid important power dividends for both parties.

To be sure, any such downward shift in the sights of a great power will come with a price. The United Kingdom's humiliation in Suez is a stark reminder of the risks great powers take when they consciously reduce their status ambitions and let themselves become subordinate to one or more great powers. Success that is earned through accommodation in a rivalry is inevitably incomplete and will generate political and strategic risks. For some countries, the transition is unavoidable, and, done properly, it can count as the best available strategic option. The pursuit of primacy has its own dangers, but accommodation is inevitably a mixed blessing.

Moreover, not all attempted accommodations succeed. There are failed examples and cases in which accommodation works for a time and then suffers a reverse. "History suggests," Kupchan points out, "that progression from early to more advanced stages of stable peace is by no means necessary and that regression from stable peace back to enmity is possible, if not common."³⁷ Initiatives to end a rivalry, as Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly note, "depend on favorable background conditions" that make the moment ripe for such an effort, such as the existence of policy entrepreneurs on the rival's side who will reciprocate the effort.³⁸ As their model suggests, rivalries "de-escalate or end when adversaries assume new interpretations, understandings, and expectations of their opponents," a process that only occurs in specific situations.³⁹ The historical record is full of rivalries that restarted after a pause—a dynamic that is confronting the United States today, after many thought it had resolved rivalrous contests with China and Russia.

Kupchan identifies several requirements for achieving what he terms a *stable peace*, which may be relevant to all forms of accommodation. Both sides must have some degree of "institutionalized constraint" (domestic structures that help restrain excessive ambitions), the two rivals must have "compatible social orders" (economic, social, and political actors in both societies must not have irresolvable conflicts), and the two sides must have "cultural commonality."⁴⁰ It is not clear that any of these criteria have been met in the U.S.-China context today. For these and other reasons, the United States might not have the opportunity to

³⁷ Kupchan, 2010, p. 72.

³⁸ Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly, 2013, pp. 12, 15.

³⁹ Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly, 2013, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Kupchan, 2010, p. 6.

accommodate a rising China in anything like this manner, given China's ambitions, autocratic nature, and the cultural divide between the two countries.

Voluntary Exit Varieties of Success and Failure

This broad type of rivalry outcome generates three potential varieties of success and failure, which are summarized in Table 1.5.

The degree of success and failure that is embodied in the subtypes of voluntary exit is generally less binary and less obvious than in the other two types of rivalry outcomes. Whereas defeat in a major war represents an inherent failure, the emergence of any of these three subtypes of voluntary exit will likely involve mixtures of benefit and cost. Some countries remain prosperous, mostly secure, and respected even after accepting secondary global status; for example, in no way can the Netherlands' post-18th century geopolitical history be deemed a failure (although the degree to which it would have been an equal success, at least in security terms, without the protective umbrella of NATO—and its reliance on U.S. power—is open for debate). Accommodations have sometimes led to lasting examples of stable peace (such as the United Kingdom and France after 1815), and sometimes accommodations have only set the stage for renewed rivalry (such as the United States and Russia after 1989). Countries that go down any of these three paths can be judged for failure and success on the basis of the categories outlined in Table 1.1.

TABLE 1.5

Varieties of Success and Failure: Voluntary Exit

Variety	Component Characteristics	Examples
1. The pursuit of interests and goals from a more junior position; the acceptance of middle- or secondary-power status	• One nation defaults to middle-power status and seeks to achieve its basic interests without aspiring to equivalent status with top power(s). • This outcome can reflect varying degrees of success in sustaining domestic interests and safety. • This outcome will impose clear penalties in global influence, often a complex mix of success and limitations.	• United Kingdom in later 20th century • Netherlands in post-Golden Age political history • Sweden after the 17th and early 18th centuries
2. Realignment to meet a new threat	• One or both sides determine that a new or different threat should take priority and that pausing or resolving the bilateral rivalry is essential to meeting that threat.	• Multiple sudden shifts in great power alliances in Europe • The United Kingdom and France gradually coming into alignment in the face of German threat • The quasi-permanent resolution of intra-European rivalries during the Cold War
3. The generation of a geopolitical truce, or even a warm, new relationship, with a former rival through various types of accommodation	• One or more sides determine that improved relations will serve their interests in general ways, which leads to both or all sides placing the rivalry on hiatus; in some cases, this becomes a permanent, stable peace.	• The United Kingdom and France in the 19th century • The United States and China from 1979 to about 2018 • The United States and Russia from 1989 to about 2014

Leading Factors That Generate Success: Societal Dynamism and Systemic Predominance

Our assessment of the three primary types of outcomes in rivalries—comprehensive defeat or occupation, sociopolitical transformation or fragmentation, and the voluntary abandonment of a rivalry—generated seven additional specific varieties of success and failure. Our research also highlighted two factors that are especially important in determining success and failure across these types. The two factors are societal dynamism, as assessed in the first phase of the study, and predominance in the international networks of the time.

Societal Dynamism

The first phase of this study documented dozens of ways in which domestic societal strength and energy underwrite competitive position. That study focused on the general causal link between societal characteristics and competitive standing. But the research for that analysis uncovered many examples of rivalries in which success or failure was decided by either societal strength and resilience or societal ossification and weakness. Table 2.1 reviews the relationship of this factor to a selected group of rivalry outcomes.

The predominant modern case is the Cold War, in which U.S. societal dynamism, creativity, and productive muscle outpaced the Soviet Union and forced Soviet leaders to confront their inability to keep up with U.S. material strength. The example of the U.S. domestic model also provided a tremendous indirect competitive advantage by creating an attractive force for other societies and peoples. But there are many other examples: the Ottoman Empire's declining prospects in its rivalries with Russia, the Austro-Hungarians, and others stemmed in part from declining domestic energy and dynamism because of an ossifying bureaucracy and theocratic orthodoxy. Japan's rise to great power status in the early 20th century, on the other hand, resulted from a burst of modernization and industrialization produced by a host of domestic reforms and investments that began in the Meiji period. China's modern history gives evidence for both sides of this spectrum: A refusal to adopt foreign technology and a generalized isolation from the modernizing world crippled China during its 19th and early

TABLE 2.1
Societal Dynamism and Rivalry Outcomes: Selected Cases

Rivalry Outcome	Role of Societal Dynamism Elements
UK success in its rivalry with China	- Industrial and technological power granted by the Industrial Revolution - Political and social institutionalization
Multiple rivals to Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire (France, Russia, Italy)	- Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire lose competitive standing because of many weakening societal characteristics - Makes them vulnerable to eventual fragmentation
China-Japan (Japanese invasion, occupation)	Japan's overreach eventually causes its defeat in WWII, but its industrial prowess, active state, and effective institutions lead to temporary predominance in the rivalry
United Kingdom–Germany	- No obvious effect on outcome - Both countries share many aspects of societal competitiveness and dynamism - Germany's loss in wars a function of decisive countervailing power
United Kingdom–Italy	Italy's defeat a function of the larger Axis loss, but British industrial and military superiority over Italy led to bilateral predominance and military victories absent German support
Cold War	U.S. and Western social dynamism was a fundamental factor that led to the Soviet embrace of reforms, which led Moscow to exit from the rivalry

SOURCE: Features information from Mazarr, 2022a.

20th century rivalries with Japan and with European and U.S. colonial missions; the explosion of domestic energy that followed Beijing's reforms and opening in the 1980s launched China into near-peer status with the United States.

This factor can manifest itself in several of the outcomes listed in Table 2.1. Societal dynamism can be a route to accommodation by forcing one side to seek a resolution to the contest. It can be a prelude to collapse or to changes in government. It can be a core component of comprehensive loss, weakening one side so badly that it becomes subject to conquest. It can lead a great power to voluntarily abandon a rivalry out of a recognition that it simply cannot compete.

A version of this process is illustrated by countries or empires with societal models that, while perhaps not showing signs of major crisis or instability, nonetheless do not allow them to keep pace with the prevailing competitive paradigm, especially in the area of technology.¹ This was partly true of Austria-Hungary, which was undertaking many reforms and enjoyed

¹ On the issue of competitive paradigms, see Michael J. Mazarr, Alexis Dale-Huang, and Matthew Sargent, *The Emerging Competitive Paradigm: A Contest of Effective Governance*, RAND Corporation, PE-A2611-1, 2024.

pockets of social dynamism but was simply not industrializing at anywhere near the pace of its European rivals. It was also true of the Soviet Union, which ultimately fragmented but only after decisions to ease controls precisely because it could not match the demands of the late industrial era.

Another way this factor can manifest is related to the financial resources a nation is able to bring to bear on a rivalry. As James Lacey has argued, conducting extended, large-scale strategic rivalries is an incredibly expensive proposition that requires investments in areas that damage the real economy of the participants. One of the main lessons from the history of such rivalries is, as Lacey put it, that “endless streams of money equals victory.” States that ran out of money had to “end hostilities on any terms the rival wished to offer.” Any extended rivalry, he concluded, “often is just as much about obtaining endless streams of money as it is about winning on the battlefield.”²

As with many other varieties of success and failure, this pattern may give rise to only a temporary lull in deeply entrenched rivalries unless more fundamental disputes are resolved. In some cases, societal weaknesses slow down one rival for a time, but when they give way to national renewal, the rivalry—or other ones—intensifies once again. This has been true of China: In the modern era, it was largely absent as an active participant in great power rivalries (except as a victim) until the postrevolutionary period, when it paused its intense conception of rivalries to fuel growth before renewing some elements of that confrontational approach. Societal weakness can lead a nation to permanently escape a rivalry, but it can also prompt a nation to pause its role.

Systemic Predominance

The other overarching factor that helps determine success or failure has recurred throughout history and could be especially relevant today: achieving dominant power and influence in the international system. By this, we do not mean simply influence over a given international order but more tangible and more material power and influence within a country’s regional or global context. This is wielded through economic and military power and by shaping the rules, norms, and structures that govern how states relate to one another. Many great powers have defined success in something like these terms (and our case studies on China, Japan, and the United Kingdom will provide specific examples of such systemic ambitions). Today, Russian and Chinese rhetoric emphasizes competing narratives for the international system, and their actions are designed to shift regional and global influence from the United States in what can be described as systemic terms.

Our research on historical cases in the first phase of this study highlighted the importance of “the degree to which a nation positions itself as a hub, or at least a highly integrated and productive node, in global or regional networks of exchange,” a position that confers

² Lacey, 2020b, pp. 37–40.

“tremendous competitive advantage.”³ Our analysis concluded further that “The advantages of being part of global economic networks is common to all the competitive societies we have considered, from ancient Greece and Rome, to the Italian Renaissance city-states, to modern Britain and the United States. All have served as the nexus of a vibrant regional or global trade network that brought both resources and goods to the society.”⁴ This conclusion reinforces the ways in which network and system predominance can serve as a variety of success in rivalries.

Barry Posen has defined *grand strategy* as a country’s “theory about how to produce security for itself.”⁵ Many great powers have determined that providing security for themselves in their chosen role as a great power demands something far more than defending borders. Great powers almost always have ambitions that run to predominance in their region or in the world, and they acquire interests that become bound up in larger global conceptions of norms, institutions, power, and influence. As a result, system-level competition is often at the center of great power rivalries.⁶

The case studies in the appendixes focus on systemic routes to success in rivalries and better inform our understanding of this particular factor. Appendixes A through E offer the full case studies, and their lessons are integrated in the wider discussion, specifically,

- Deak’s examination of Austria-Hungary’s efforts to gain systemic influence in its neighborhood shows the ways in which great powers can be overwhelmed by multiple intersecting system dynamics, especially if they try to do too much.
- Heath’s discussion of China’s ancient tribute system provides an example of how a regional hegemon can earn deference from smaller neighbors—but also demonstrates that China undertook many forms of mutually complementary systemic influence-seeking and suggests that a similar approach would not work today.
- Fauerbach’s treatment of Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere as a mechanism for systemic influence shows that such strategies rely on some degree of alignment with the interests of other system members for success.
- Goddard describes the critical normative elements of Prussia’s drive for German unification and European influence and the ways in which acceptance of the legitimacy of a rising country’s aims can be an essential precondition for systemic success.
- Shiffrinson evaluates U.S. post-Cold War efforts to preserve a predominant role in Europe and shows a great power’s potential to preserve a leading role in a system, if what it is offering the other members is a sufficient lure for continued participation.

³ Mazarr, 2022a, p. 54.

⁴ Mazarr, 2022a, p. 56.

⁵ Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 1.

⁶ Michael J. Mazarr and Tim McDonald, *Competing for the System: The Essence of Emerging Strategic Rivalries*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1404-2, 2022.

This source of success or failure in rivalries can be especially relevant at what might be termed *ordering moments* (or *disordering moments*), periods during which systems are especially fluid and states have greater opportunity for shaping. Certainly, some great powers (or empires) have managed to gain influence over a stable or existing system. But in many cases, periods of transition or turmoil have allowed one contestant to grab disproportionate systemic power by exerting preeminent influence over narratives and norms, seizing central economic and technological power, and leading influence in the era's multilateral institutions, which creates a gravitational effect throughout the system. Great powers that have seized such opportunities have driven their success in rivalries; countries that have remained more marginal within the international system of the time have suffered penalties in their approach to such contests.

In this process, a great power gains material and institutional advantages that allow it to exercise indirect influence because of its gravitational effect: Other countries seek to trade or cooperate with it, join its institutions, gain its investment, train their officials at its schools, and (often) collaborate with its military. (If the systemic role is limited to a single issue or domain, those effects will be similarly constrained.) The systemic leader invests heavily in its position, from providing financial support to its institutions, to directing economic investment to other countries, to developing the personnel and capabilities (and sometimes foreign military posture) that are needed to play the role.

Several cases reflect this strategy of seeking success in rivalries by shaping the system for strategic advantage. Examples of general forms of systemic influence-seeking include the Concert of Europe system, U.S. efforts to liberalize trade in the post-WWII era, British antislavery efforts in the 19th century, Dutch and British free trade efforts from the 17th to 19th centuries, Soviet efforts to spread Marxism and communism, the post-WWII anti-colonial movement, and Moscow's attempts to maintain a Russia-centric network of states in its "near abroad."

Measuring Success in Progress: The Tipping Point of a Rivalry

Some international rivalries last for decades, even a century or more. They may eventually reach a threshold that can be defined as an ending—such as the U.S.-UK rivalry or, later, the UK-France contest—but in other cases, the rivalries merely hit lulls and then reemerge with renewed ferocity. It could be that the U.S.-China rivalry is not destined for a clean end point, at least not any time soon.

Each of the varieties of success we have outlined involves a conclusion to a rivalry, whether through one side prevailing or both sides deciding to abandon the contest. But success and failure can also be measured while a rivalry remains active, and in the case of the U.S.-China rivalry, it may have to be assessed in this fashion for some time. In one sense, this measurement is simply a scorecard of relative advantage gained by the rivals: whether one side is gaining a decisive economic or technological advantage, whether one side is prevailing in a

limited war, or whether one side is gathering a decisive array of allies. That sort of in-progress assessment will be important to understanding where the United States stands relative to China (and Russia).

A RAND report on strategic competition offers a framework for assessing the status of a rivalry in these terms.⁷ The box on the following page outlines the essential components of that framework.

Evaluating a competition through such indicators can provide an emergent sense of success and failure while a rivalry remains underway.⁸ From the framework presented in the RAND report, an initial such assessment was produced as of 2018 and concluded that China was definitively gaining in many areas and was likely to pull even with the United States in selected competitive indicators. But the assessment also concluded that the United States retained tremendous residual advantages and was unlikely to be surpassed in a sort of power transition. In particular, global alignments of power related to the rivalry strongly favored the United States and would almost certainly continue to do so.

In and of itself, such an ongoing measurement of relative advantage does not indicate success in the sense of a final victory for one side; it is about accumulating wins and losses. There may be a more significant form of interim triumph that could emerge even while a rivalry remains active, such as a general time when the probable outcome of a rivalry becomes clear to everyone involved even before the rivalry “ends.” At a certain point, it was clear to British officials that they would simply not be able to keep up with the burgeoning United States. The Ottoman Empire became “the sick man of Europe” by the mid-19th century, but its rivalries with several European powers kept going for another 60 years. By the early 1980s, many senior Soviet officials recognized that they could not compete with the West; absent a Mikhail Gorbachev, who acted decisively on that recognition, the rivalry could have lasted decades longer.

We might call such a transition the *tipping point* of a rivalry—an emergent and increasingly strongly held belief by the rivals and most observers that one side is destined to prevail in some broad sense, even if the rivalry persists. These tipping points are seldom abrupt. It can take decades for leaders in the losing nation to accept that the trends are running unalterably against them or even for outside observers to correctly read the evidence about relative standing. (Many non-Soviet economists continued to exaggerate Soviet strengths right into the early 1980s.) But gradually, the signs that one side is inexorably prevailing become unde-

⁷ Michael J. Mazarr, Bryan Frederick, and Yvonne K. Crane, *Understanding a New Era of Strategic Competition*, RAND Corporation, RR-A290-4, 2022.

⁸ This was the central message of the agenda for the United States’ China strategy, as laid out by two future senior Biden administration officials in Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 5, September–October 2019. Yet, the essay still highlighted the importance of thinking through end states. A critical question, the authors argued, is “[W]hat might a plausible desired outcome of this competition look like? A failure to connect competitive means to clear ends will allow U.S. policy to drift toward competition for competition’s sake and then fall into a dangerous cycle of confrontation.”

Framework for Assessing a Strategic Competition in Progress

1. National Alignment to the Context for Competition

Relative standing in elements of the competitive paradigm in which the competition is unfolding^a

Current trends that are helping define the competitive paradigm include

- a more multipolar world system
- challenges to the neoliberal model
- the fourth Industrial Revolution
- the rise of vulnerable infospheres
- climate change and crisis.

2. Measures of National Power and Competitiveness

Relative advantage in the components of domestic national power and vibrancy that support competitive standing

Leading indicators identified by the analysis are

- the overall productive capacity of the country
- the ability to build frontier technologies
- fiscal agility
- the effectiveness of governance
- the level and effectiveness of military resources.

3. International Position and Influence

Relative standing in the elements of global posture, power, and influence that shape a country's relative position

Leading indicators identified by the analysis are

- economic posture and engagement
- military posture and engagement
- paradigmatic and ideological competition
- the alignment of key states.

4. The Shape and Standing of Bilateral Competitions

Trends in relative advantage or absolute success or failure in areas of clashing interests and objectives that define the nature of the bilateral contests

Leading indicators identified by the analysis are

- the protection of core national interests
- trends in the relative success or failure on issues where interests clash or intersect
- the frequency of areas of competition.

SOURCE: Adapted from Mazarr, Frederick, and Crane, 2022.

^a We assess this issue in detail in a companion essay. See Mazarr, Dale-Huang, and Sargent, 2024.

niable, with potent geopolitical results: Past the tipping point, it becomes far more difficult for the losing side to recruit allies, generate influence, or sustain its domestic or international legitimacy. Identifying a tipping point is, therefore, different from assessing the overall metrics of general competition.

This concept is similar to, but different from, the idea of a power transition or to hegemony theory in world politics, both of which speak to the significance of one power overtaking another.⁹ First, a tipping point is not generally about overtaking—a rising power catching up to and surpassing a leading power. Instead, it depicts a situation in which two relatively balanced powers become more unequal in influence. A tipping point in a rivalry is only a measure of the relative prospects between two rivals, not an assessment of standing in a global hierarchy of power. The winning and losing sides will still have multiple other power relationships within which they can either reassure or concern themselves. Even the state that is considered to be on the losing side can theoretically sustain its security, depending on its relative standing with other powers. A tipping point is not based entirely on objective measures of power but rather a complex and prospective assessment of many qualitative factors and their trajectories.

Tipping points tend to produce, or at least accompany, other developments. Well-established tipping points often elicit a certain equilibrium in the rivalry, since the losing side recognizes the need to settle disputes and preserve as much power as it can and the winning side can now wait for history to produce favored outcomes. Tipping points can be associated with or produce changes in leadership or governance in the ebbing or losing side because its leaders and elites recognize the need for change. They can also prompt surges of reform or a doubling down on constraints and orthodoxies as a fearful and conservative ruling class tries to reassert its control (the later Ottoman Empire is a good example of such a dynamic).

There is no established literature on the idea of a tipping point in rivalries and no strong empirical basis on which to rely when trying to identify its key features. When we reviewed the historical cases for both phases of this analysis, we identified at least five primary indicators of such a tipping point—developments that signal one rival is beginning to gain decisive momentum relative to the other. Not all five indicators need be present to generate a tipping point; some combination could be enough, and the first indicator is not characteristic of all such events. The indicators are as follows:

- *The accumulation of decisively superior national scale and mass.* If the rivals are mismatched in terms of scale and the bigger power gains the ability to capture its full advantage, this trend will signal that the rivalry is headed in only one direction. A leading example is the U.S.-UK rivalry: At some point, it became clear that the United States—

⁹ For treatments of hegemony theory, see Steve Chan, “Exploring Puzzles in Power-Transition Theory: Implications for Sino-American Relations,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2004; Robert Gilpin, “The Theory of Hegemonic War,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Spring 1988; and Ronald L. Tammen, Jacek Kugler, and Douglas Lemke, “Foundations of Power Transition Theory,” in William R. Thompson, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2023.

with its vastly larger population, land area, and endowment of natural resources—was going to surpass and eventually overshadow the United Kingdom.

- *The emergence of a strong and growing advantage in national innovative and technical capacities.* When one rival begins to vastly overshadow the other in technological sophistication, learning and adaptation, scientific achievement, innovative energy, and other measures of national dynamism—and if the trajectory appears to become irreversible—it can signal a tipping point. The Ottoman Empire’s technological weakness vis-à-vis the industrializing West and the Soviet Union’s industrial-technological stagnation in many areas are useful examples of such a dynamic.
- *A rising political incoherence and ineffectiveness on one side.* One indicator often associated with a tipping point is one of the participants crossing some critical threshold of political incapacity and instability. The polity will remain technically unified and governed; it might not fragment or collapse for decades, if ever. But it has reached a point of ineffectiveness, infighting, and general enervation—one grounded in irreversible trends—that strongly indicates an inevitable outcome to the rivalry. Later imperial Spain, the later Ottoman Empire, and the later Soviet Union all display this hallmark.
- *The emergence of crippling financial-productive weakness on one side of the rivalry.* Although it is not a societal characteristic, the issue of financial weakness is a very common route to failure in international rivalries. States that overextend themselves, become deeply indebted, and/or lose critical sources of revenue see their competitive potential hollowed out. Imperial Spain is perhaps the classic example of this dynamic, but there are many others, such as the late Soviet Union and France at various points in its history. Therefore, financial frailty becomes obvious and, in some cases, irreversible, it will signal an emerging tipping point.
- *The critical loss of domestic and international legitimacy on the part of one rival.* Finally, this fifth indicator can be the product of some combination of the other four—in particular, political incoherence and financial insolvency—but it can also emerge on its own. One common route to a loss of legitimacy is one rival undertaking a series of belligerent actions, including aggressive war-making but also general harassment and meddling in other countries, which undermines its legitimacy as a recognized actor in the global system. Long-term repressive rule, including persistent human rights violations, can also contribute to this outcome. At some point, one rival crosses a threshold of illegitimacy from which it cannot recover, with significant implications for its geopolitical position and even economic prospects. This type of moment is another indicator of an emerging tipping point. Such collapsing legitimacy was certainly part of the story of several tipping points in rivalries, involving, for example, the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Union.

If this concept has validity, in addition to assessing ongoing progress in key areas as outlined in the text box, the United States can assess the potential for a tipping point in the rivalry and take actions to generate one, if at all possible. In terms of the first characteristic,

at one point some believed that China, with almost five times the population, could muscle past the United States purely on the basis of scale. Today, however, with projections for a rapidly declining population in China and many other constraints, such a mass-based overtaking seems unlikely. Additionally, neither side seems likely to fall into a position of disastrous technological-innovative disadvantage that is analogous to earlier failed great powers. Political instability and ineffectiveness are certainly risks for the United States, as is financial insolvency. China seems to be losing legitimacy based on its domestic and global policies, although the United States has suffered badly on this score as well.

A strategy to manipulate the specific characteristics of a tipping point would seek to magnify U.S. strengths, to the degree possible, in each of the five categories. Such policies could build on well-established advantages and some current policies. The United States could seek to expand its implicit scale and mass, for example, through international economic, technological, and military cooperative relationships, confronting China with a combined core group of highly aligned and militarily and technologically integrated allies. It could redouble investments in research and development but also look for opportunities to free up and promote new innovative dynamism (including reducing the private sector advantages of unproductive uses of capital). The United States could take decisive steps to place its long-term finances on a stable footing. It could also engage in strong narrative efforts that challenge Chinese legitimacy (as Beijing is now doing, for example, around South China Sea disputes) and take more-difficult steps to reaffirm its own legitimacy, such as exercising restraint in the use of preemptive military action and sanctions and joining key international tribunals it has so far spurned. One of the indicators of a looming tipping point—political instability and ineffectiveness—is not subject to general policy decisions.

Of course, there is no guarantee of a tipping point in this rivalry because there is no certainty that one of the rivals will lose in a clearly relative sense. China may surmount many of its looming challenges; the United States may overcome its political gridlock; both may benefit from emerging technologies and achieve new phases of economic progress. There is a future in which no clear winner emerges for an indefinite period, in which case no tipping point would materialize. As we will argue in Chapter 3, however, the steps that best position the United States for such a truly enduring rivalry overlap significantly with those that are needed to maximize the potential for a tipping point.

Findings and Lessons: Models of Success and Failure for Great Powers

From the research and analysis we have described, we derived final typologies of failure and success for great powers in enduring rivalries. On the critical question of time frames, these varieties of failure and success focus on what might be described as long-term verdicts on specific periods in history—the ultimate outcomes of rivalries somewhat beyond their immediate end points but far short of centuries-long judgments on the comprehensive rise and fall of nations. As previously noted, these temporal perspectives are not mutually exclusive: A nation could experience social decline and overreach at the same time, perhaps one as a product of the other.

Table 3.1 summarizes the seven candidate varieties of success and failure that emerged from our research. The first four reflect basic categories of outcomes that do not speak to the primary reasons *why* they occur; the last three varieties are statements of causal mechanisms but ones that can also emerge as the basic variety of success or failure in a rivalry. The appendixes offer five in-depth case studies of individual great powers that conceptualize success or failure, particularly in terms of systemic outcomes. Taken together, the analysis suggests several broad findings.

First, *no single type of success or failure typically describes a rivalry outcome*. The success or failure of specific nations in rivalries often reflects some combination of these outcome types, especially in the modern era. Several of these varieties could be part of the outcome of a U.S.-China rivalry. Any future scenario involving the United States and China is likely to represent elements from two or more of these varieties.

Second, *success and failure in great power rivalries can be understood in intrinsic terms, along a spectrum of outcomes that begins with two critical factors: preserving basic territorial integrity and promoting domestic stability and dynamism*. Figure 3.1 offers a way of conceptualizing a spectrum of success for great powers: physical territorial integrity is the baseline goal or interest, other domestic goals are next on the priority list of success, and external objectives of various levels of ambition round out the list.

This spectrum raises again the issue we encountered repeatedly in both phases of this project: how to characterize national outcomes that leave room for prosperity and various forms of unilateral or collective security but that stop short of dominance, or even equivalence, in direct bilateral rivalries with great powers. The Netherlands was once a global

TABLE 3.1

Varieties of Success and Failure in Strategic Rivalries

Type of Rivalry Outcome	Variety of Success and Failure	Primary Characteristics	Primary Examples from Great Power Rivalries
Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest and occupation	- One side or set of countries utterly defeats another and conquers or temporarily occupies the territory of that country. - The defeated power abandons future ambitions in the rivalry, either permanently or for a very long period.	- Britain-Germany (WWII) - Russia-Germany (WWII) - United States-Japan (WWII) - France-Germany (WWII)
	Comprehensive loss in total war	- One side decisively defeats the other in a major or total war, but the victory does not lead to full conquest or occupation. - The defeated side is forced to abandon pretensions to equivalence in the rivalry, at least for a period.	- Britain-France (1815) - Prussia-France (1815) - Britain-Germany (WWI) - France-Germany (WWI)
Sociopolitical transformation or fragmentation	Political transformation, revolution, or instability	- A major political change or disruption shifts the basic geopolitical stance of the country. - There is a change that is not simply a change in the governing party or the national attitude. - There are larger domestic shifts that more fundamentally change the country's outlook.	China-Russia/Soviet Union (1949)
	Fragmentation of the political entity	An empire or nation divides into sub-entities, none of which is capable of continuing the rivalry in the same way.	- United States-Soviet Union - China-Soviet Union (1989)
Voluntary exit from the rivalry by one or both sides	Acceptance of secondary- or middle-power status	- The basic pattern is that one nation involved in a rivalry decides to abandon some degree of its pretensions to global great power status. - The regressing power undergoes a partial retrenchment of its security ambitions. - For example, a recognition that the factors of scale and power prevent one side from continuing the rivalry.	- Netherlands-European powers - Sweden-European powers - Britain-Russia (1956)

Table 3.1—Continued

Type of Rivalry Outcome	Variety of Success and Failure	Primary Characteristics	Primary Examples from Great Power Rivalries
Voluntary exit from the rivalry by one or both sides	Seeks exit from rivalry to focus on different threat	- One or both sides decide to exit the rivalry to focus on different challenges or threats—sometimes massive domestic issues, sometimes different geopolitical threats. - One variant can involve an implicit or explicit active partnering or an alliance with the former rival, with formal agreements to settle existing disputes.	- Britain-France (late 19th century) - United States-China (1972)
	Seeks accommodation or stable peace with rival(s) as a superior or a necessary route to achieving national interests	- This variant often reflects a recognition by a great power of shifts in the balance of power that demand a degree of retrenchment or an acknowledgement of the rival's position. - This variant often involves a targeted approach with concessions to stabilize the relationship with at least one main rival and is often employed in the context of multiple rivalries.	- Britain-China (1900) - China-France (1900) - China-Germany (1900) - Austria-Hungary-Ottoman empire (1908)

FIGURE 3.1
Scale of Rivalry Outcomes: Internal to External



hegemon, counted in some lists of cyclical power and national rise and fall as one of the three most dominant modern empires or quasi-empires (along with the United Kingdom and the United States). Today, the Netherlands could not remotely compete with other great powers on its own. Yet its society is rich and largely safe, it excels in certain high technology industries, and it has had a cultural effect well beyond its size. This surely cannot count as *national* failure, even though the country's pretensions to global great power rivalry status have not succeeded.

The typology depicted in Figure 3.1 offers a set of criteria to evaluate degrees of national success that are distinct from success or failure in rivalries. Those criteria begin with national survival as a territorial entity with a defined identity, progress through various levels of national independence and prosperity, and culminate with various degrees of influence over the international system. Such measures will ultimately accumulate to form a broad typology of success or failure, but they also provide a more issue-specific window on the question of such outcomes, especially when a rivalry is still active.

Third, *many rivalry outcomes are temporary rather than permanent*. Rivalries only truly end in one of three ways: one side collapses or is conquered, one side decides to give up

and grant predominance to the other, or both sides agree to transcend the competition and develop a different relationship. Outcomes short of those results often only set the stage for a more angry and bitter return of the confrontation later, such as Germany from 1918 to 1939 and Russia between 1989 and today.

Even versions of comprehensive defeat have seen the conquered nation rise to again engage in the rivalry. Lacey noted in his summarization of the findings of a series of cases on great power rivalries that the loser of such contests “sees defeat as a matter of not having acted with sufficient strength or resolve” and thus “adopts a more coercive position in the future.”¹ The “loser of a previous contest is almost always more belligerent in any future crisis.”² Geoffrey Wawro, describing European rivalries, similarly concludes, “A power eclipsed by another is not disarmed; on the contrary, it can use military deterrents, alliances, finances, trade, and levers of the media and public opinion (soft power) to improve its relative situation and thwart the ‘winner.’”³ In the French-German rivalry through WWI, the “French won. But in their own efforts to win the peace, they antagonized a Germany that was really only lightly wounded by the Treaty of Versailles,” which would “rebound to defeat France in 1940.”⁴

These varieties should, therefore, be seen not so much as unconditional outcomes of rivalries but as possible stages in a long-term rivalry process. The only version that tends to offer true resolution is accommodation or realignment, but that seems like a low-probability development in the U.S.-China rivalry without significant changes in the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) goals or character. Moreover, as Kupchan notes in his study of transcending rivalries, even rivals that have reached a fairly elaborate degree of accommodation can fall back into hostility.⁵

Fourth, *the dynamism and power-generating capacity of a great power’s society is the essential foundation for success under all models*. This reiterates the lesson of the first phase of this analysis, but it was reemphasized by the research and cases reviewed for this report. The essential decision points that lead great powers to seek different versions of success or failure are typically grounded in a perception of their own capacity. Partly, this relates to scale: The Netherlands and the United Kingdom could ultimately not avoid confronting the fact of their limited size relative to larger great powers. But it also has to do with the engines of economic, technological, cultural, and military power that enable different versions of success. Nineteenth-century China and post-WWII United States offer polar opposite examples of how dynamism, or the lack of it, in a society is a precondition for success.

¹ Lacey, 2020b, p. 6.

² Lacey, 2020b, p. 6.

³ Geoffrey Wawro, “A New Europe with New Rivalries: The Franco-German Rivalry,” in James Lacey, ed., *Great Strategic Rivalries: From the Classical World to the Cold War*, paperback ed., Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 399.

⁴ Wawro, 2020, p. 399.

⁵ Kupchan, 2010.

Fifth, *short of comprehensive victory in war or national collapse, the punitive and coercive imposition of terms is not a common avenue to success in rivalries.*⁶ The historical record has many cases of great powers that have lost decisively in war, which led to a failed outcome in a rivalry. Other cases (such as the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires after WWI) demonstrate the potential failure (or success for the rival) of great powers that fragment or collapse, often under the pressure of war. There are no apparent cases in the historical record of one great power succeeding in a rivalry purely by imposing coercive power short of war until the other side broke and abandoned the rivalry. The closest might be the Cold War, but even in that case, the historical consensus is that the basic variety of the failure is national decline (even when taking into account the Carter and Reagan administrations' military-building and the general recovery of U.S. optimism and economic growth in the 1980s, which added to Moscow's concerns). The accumulating weakness of the Soviet system and its accelerating decline in the mid- to late-1970s convinced influential Soviet leaders of the need for change independent of U.S. pressure.⁷

A related and broader point is that strategies for conducting a rivalry that are grounded in seeking primacy (or some version of it) or in intense confrontation will end up generating reactions in the rival and other actors that undermine the purposes of the strategy. Kupchan argues that the cases he reviewed of rivalries that end suggest that "preponderant power, wielded with unstinting resolve," is not a reliable avenue to successful rivalry outcomes.⁸ His research points to "the opposite conclusion—that the unfettered exercise of power triggers balancing and undermines a rules-based order. . . . Stable peace requires mutual reassurance and respect, not mutual suspicion and resentment."⁹

A sixth lesson is closely related to the fifth but speaks more specifically to the degree of ambition that is reflected in a great power's approach to rivalries. The lesson is that *excessive ambition and strategic overreach contribute to several varieties of failure.* A consistent pattern in many cases of failure is that a great power aims too high and ends up bankrupting itself, generating a decisive counter-coalition or fragmenting its own political coherence. The idea of strategic overreach is of course a well-established theme in historical and international relations literature, but our analysis found that it cropped up in many rivalries. Germany and Japan's trajectories in the 1930s are the most obvious examples (and Fauerbach's case of

⁶ As Kupchan argues, "Long-standing rivalries end not through isolation and containment, but through negotiation and mutual accommodation" (Kupchan, 2010, p. 13).

⁷ For data on the decline of the Soviet system, see Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Winter 2000–2001.

⁸ Kupchan, 2010, p. 394.

⁹ Kupchan, 2010, p. 394. Vladislav Zubok at numerous points explains how the Reagan confrontation exacerbated the Soviet situation, but it was not the fundamental cause and it was not decisive in the maturation of Soviet weaknesses (Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, paperback ed., University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere in Appendix C provides some history), but the Soviet Union's global pretensions also helped bankrupt its system. U.S. post-Cold War ambitions in Iraq and, to some degree, Europe (as Shiffrinson's case in Appendix E describes) have imposed significant financial and political costs on the United States' global role.

The flip side of that lesson is that less ambitious, but still sufficient, conceptions of success can sometimes serve great powers very well. Repeatedly, during the Cold War, while sustaining a potent military and investing in economic dynamism, the United States was willing to remain patient and sidestep demands for intense confrontation. Examples include U.S. responses to Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the offer of a partial compromise to end the Cuban Missile Crisis (including a promise not to invade), the exercise of escalatory restraint in Korea and Vietnam, the whole process of *détente*, and Ronald Reagan's eventual decision to embrace Gorbachev and his reforms (against the warnings of many hawks, who saw the new Soviet efforts as a trap). This willingness to accept limits to its goals served the United States very well in the long term.

Similar patterns appear in several of the older historical cases. As Goddard explains in her essay in Appendix D, Prussia's effort to build legitimacy as a route to German unification and great power status led it to reject the idea of regional domination and to avoid polarizing approaches. The United Kingdom accepted constraints on its ability to retain global primacy in the face of the United States' rise. Deak's essay in Appendix A suggests that it was when Austria-Hungary was patient that it was the most successful; it had less success when it tried to impose outcomes. The risks of overreach were apparent in institutional terms as well: Excessive engagement exhausted Austria-Hungary's diplomatic corps by reacting to every crisis.

Seventh, *status considerations and competition are often critical variables in how great powers take stock of in-progress rivalries*. Final and comprehensive outcomes in rivalries obviously establish new status relationships between the contestants. But the literature and the cases that we reviewed for this analysis reinforce the idea that great powers in rivalries seek status as much as anything else, sometimes as a first-order goal. China and Russia appear to be motivated to a great degree by status concerns in their effort to shift the international system away from U.S. predominance.

Eighth and finally, our analysis suggests that *the highest levels of success for great powers that seek to improve their position but avoid war combine the pursuit of significant degrees of influence and power with mechanisms for system stability*. This highlights, in a different way, the importance of competing at the systems level. Bilateral rivalries are always nested within larger systems that are regional and global in scope and divided into distinct issue areas and domains. One approach is to shape those systems for competitive advantage, a route to success we described above. But another systemic priority is to create mechanisms of system stability that help dampen the risks of the rivalry and offer ways for both sides to pursue stability in ways that serve both their interests. These mechanisms have taken different forms depending on the era, and they can include larger multilateral institutions that allow for

conflict avoidance and that place pressure on rivals by third parties; arms control and classic confidence-building measures are obvious modern examples.

One reason nations use multilateral institutions is that it turns out to be risky to count on deterrence working as hoped during intense great power rivalries. Large-scale rivalries place the fundamental security interests of great powers in peril in ways that tend to breed excessive fear and, sometimes, overreaction to strategic threats. These types of rivalries put nations in positions from which they act on a sense of imperative, believing that their survival as a great power, or their very security, is at stake. At such moments, deterrence can easily fail under the pressure of an urgent, perceived need to act.

Several modern great powers have had a clear sense that they stood to lose a major war, yet they embarked on the path anyway. Deak's case in Appendix A notes that Austria-Hungary knew it would lose in WWI but still embraced war partly out of a desire to exercise dominant influence over areas in its immediate neighborhood. Many senior Japanese military and civilian leaders knew that they would lose an extended war with the United States but became convinced that they had to act or face relegation to a second-tier power under the pressure of U.S. coercive sanctions. The U.S. commitment to Vietnam stemmed from similar sentiments: A fear that its credibility in great power rivalries was on the line in that distant proxy war. These cases call into question the idea that a great power that is determined to preserve the peace can build an objective correlation of forces that will prevent recourse to war. Encouraging stability in a rivalry and meeting the other side's most essential interests, if possible—the assurance component of any deterrent relationship—is as important as a great power's degree of military capability.

Conceptualizing Success in the Rivalry with China: Lessons for the United States Today

The more-general lessons and other themes of our analysis suggest several implications for U.S. strategy, especially in its dominant rivalry with China. Our analysis highlights one theme with special significance for these outcomes: time frames. Conclusions that hold for China in the next three to eight years, still under Xi Jinping's leadership and at what may be the peak of the country's relative power, might not hold for China in the 2040s, 2050s, or later, when the full implications of its demographic decline, economic misalignments, and autocratic system become apparent. Moreover, China and the United States will both be confronting a different strategic context: the rise of third powers (including an India whose economy could, by that time, have exceeded the United States in terms of purchasing power parity); intensifying ecological crises; and potential new threats from artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and other sources. Leaders and governments will have turned over multiple times in both countries by then.

The history of previous rivalries offers another caution: During the course of a rivalry, each side's trajectory of success and failure can vary widely. A snapshot of the status of

relative power in the 1970s might have suggested that the United States had entered a crisis period and long-term decline—yet, within a decade, it was clearly set to prevail. The conception of U.S. and PRC prospects could run through a similar series of highs and lows as the rivalry continues.

When imagining outcomes for the U.S.-China rivalry, therefore, we must be careful not to treat the next several years as indicative of the long-range future. A rivalry that lasts from 1949 (the founding of the PRC) to 2050 or 2070 would not be especially long by historical standards, but such an extended time span allows for momentous shifts in the perception of the rivalry on both sides. Any of the varieties that we outlined above is theoretically possible in that period, depending on other factors.

The Uniqueness of the United States–People’s Republic of China Rivalry

The most important implication of this analysis is that the U.S.-PRC rivalry today may be historically unique compared with any other modern case. Unlike premodern cases, both rivals possess nuclear weapons and are competing to master a rapidly changing competitive paradigm that is grounded in advanced technology. Unlike the Cold War, China’s domestic economic and technology engines might be a rough match for the United States. Unlike cases of rivals that share a border, the United States and China are geographically remote from one another, which conditions the strategies that can be brought to bear. Unlike the UK-U.S. case, China’s political culture and communist system make it a poor candidate for large-scale accommodation. And unlike earlier historical cases, one side conquering the other is out of the question, as is one side conclusively defeating the other in a comprehensive war at acceptable cost.

For all these reasons, the prospects for the U.S.-China rivalry must be treated with caution. Historical precedents may not capture the full dynamic of this competition, and the rivalry could generate its own, unique variety of success or failure to add to our list. One very plausible future is one in which there is neither a winner nor a comprehensive resolution of the rivalry for many decades. It is no accident that U.S. officials and scholars have had a difficult time laying out a clear and precise end state for the rivalry; they are operating on new geopolitical ground, with few clear markers to guide their thinking.

On the other hand, some of the established models clearly offer at least plausible outcomes for the current rivalry, and some of these outcomes could emerge more quickly. Either government, for example, could decide to step back from active confrontation and allow the other more running room. A CCP facing domestic crises or instability might do this, as might a populist U.S. administration determined to scale back foreign commitments. Other outcomes would take more time to unfold, such as the gradual societal decline of one of the rivals or the accumulation of systemic dominance by one side.

The Shape of Success

This analysis also highlights ways in which the United States can think about defining success in its rivalry with China. Table 3.2 offers very rough ideas of how the varieties of success and failure we have outlined could play out in the U.S.-China rivalry. As Table 3.2 makes clear, many of the varieties, such as comprehensive victory or even sociopolitical transformation, do not seem to offer feasible or likely resolutions of this rivalry, at least for the foreseeable future. This analysis supports several conclusions about what success and failure might look like.

First, our conceptions of the outcomes in which great powers transcend a rivalry suggest a sobering initial conclusion: *Given the nature of China's ambitions and its system and identity, there appears to be no short-term prospect for outcomes that transcend the rivalry.* Today's CCP has no intention of living in a world of U.S. predominance and might even be determined to achieve a sort of unquestioned regional and then global leadership. History suggests that most rivalries do end and therefore, by pure historical probability, such a transcension could be possible at a later time. For various reasons, transcension should remain the ultimate vision for U.S. strategy.

Yet there are limited short- or even medium-term prospects for such an outcome in the U.S.-China rivalry. The government of the CCP remains apparently bent on a bold course to redress perceived status inconsistencies and specific material objectives and does not appear to believe that the rivalry has reached an equilibrium at which it could agree to major concessions. It is not ready, in other words, for a version of Kupchan's conception of a stable peace. There is abundant evidence that CCP leaders remain confident of the long-term trajectory of power relative to the United States and thus there is little desire to accommodate a secondary role. China's long-term self-conception as a cultural and civilizational power may further complicate efforts to resolve any rivalry by standing in the way of solutions that presume an essential equivalence. There is an ideological component to the U.S.-China rivalry that, however different from the Cold War, nonetheless makes this contest different from many previous European rivalries. The CCP may simply be constitutionally incapable of acceding to any variant of success that does not deliver degrees of power over other variants, which will be unacceptable to the United States.

However, China's ambitions and requirements can be interpreted in different ways. Many scholars dispute the more extreme descriptions of the CCP's goals that warn of a demand for global hegemony. Beijing's various concepts, initiatives, and catchphrases that describe the world it seeks are commonly vague to the point of meaninglessness. The most likely interpretation is that most Chinese leaders do not have a very precise notion of exactly what a world must look like to satisfy their basic interests and that such concepts remain a work in progress.

It would be premature to conclude, we therefore contend, that the nature of the CCP rules out *any* eventual resolution of the U.S.-China rivalry short of war or collapse. It is possible to imagine changes in CCP thinking that would produce a stronger readiness to seek a stable

TABLE 3.2

Possible Rivalry Outcomes: United States and People's Republic of China

Type of Rivalry Outcome	Variety of Success and Failure	Hypothetical U.S.-PRC Scenario
Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest and occupation	• Highly unlikely or not feasible • Geographic distance, the size of rivals, the lack of sufficient military forces, and nuclear weapons appear to rule out this outcome
	Comprehensive loss in total war	• A war over Taiwan escalates to comprehensive confrontation • The loser is so damaged and discredited that it must withdraw from active pursuit of the rivalry, at least for a period of decades
Sociopolitical transformation or fragmentation	Political transformation, revolution, or instability	• In the United States: – A populist–isolationist party or president comes to power, abandons U.S. commitments in Asia, and effectively abandons the rivalry, at least in geopolitical terms (although not in economic-technological terms) • In China: – A crisis of CCP rule and broad-based domestic instability brings to power a postcommunist regime that fundamentally reorients its geopolitical ambitions (although it is unclear whether the successor regimes would have such a change in external strategy) • A lesser version could be a transition from the Xi Jinping regime to a less confrontational leadership
	Fragmentation of the political entity	• Either side experiences secessions of components of the current polity, which leaves smaller and weakened core political entities that are unable to continue the rivalry
Voluntary exit from the rivalry by one or both sides	Accept secondary- or middle-power status	• One side determines that its national power is not sufficient to compete over the long-term and scales back its ambitions to the level of a major regional player without great power rivalry objectives (i.e., accepts such a role as Germany, France, or Japan as sufficient)
	Realignment to confront a new threat	• One or both sides decide to pause or more fully transcend the rivalry to focus resources—and perhaps joint effort—on a new threat • Difficult to envision a geopolitical threat that would justify this variety; it could be from extreme climate change, a pandemic, or some other nonstate threat
	Accommodation or stable peace with rival(s)	• Both sides decide to transcend the rivalry in large part for more general reasons of self-interest • The two sides seek resolution in the primary areas of dispute and publicly commit to a new form of relationship

peace. As already noted, various long-term scenarios could set the stage for such a shift in perceptions, including intensified Chinese economic stagnation and societal weakness or the rise of other threats to China. We cannot forecast the economic or social position of China in 2040 or 2060; it could once again be in the market for a windup of the rivalry with the United

States, at least for a time. And, as Ryan Hass points out, Xi Jinping will not live forever, and course corrections, or even reversals, after a leadership change are common occurrences in modern Chinese history.¹⁰

To be clear, any serious Chinese agreement to a form of accommodation would require significant changes to the government's current ambitions and approaches, which does not seem likely at the moment. All we are saying is that equally bitter rivalries have eventually ended through some form of accommodation, and it would be wrong to preemptively reject the potential for some version of that outcome at a later date—either years or decades from now.

Given this theoretical potential, it would appear wise for the United States to enunciate a vision for a mutual, agreed-on transformation of relations and a stable peace as the ultimate outcome of this contest. At the moment, many nods to a transformative accommodation are quick references in speeches or strategy documents, reflecting the unavoidable reality that neither side seems ready for such a resolution. But talking about such an outcome more directly and endorsing it as an ultimate goal could be important for the United States.

Ryan Hass lays out a persuasive example of such a vision. The United States, he argues, should seek to “keep China entangled in a global system that regulates interstate behavior and pushes Beijing to conclude that the best path to the realization of its national ambitions would be to operate within existing rules and norms.”¹¹ His notion accepts that China has become an ambitious and belligerent power; however, he also argues in support of efforts to convince Beijing that carving out a rejectionist club of revisionist states serves its interests less well than a tough, but still somewhat collaborative, role in a shared order. This partly requires an “affirmative framing of U.S. policy” that would “signal that the United States is not hostile to China’s rise and would welcome a healthier relationship in the future.”¹²

Second, although such agreed or comprehensive systemic forms of success seem to be ruled out for the moment, one of the great challenges for U.S. strategy is to develop a *persuasive conception of medium-term success, short of a comprehensive, long-term conclusion to the rivalry*. Because both China and the United States appear to recognize the risks of war, seem to appreciate the value of pursuing their objectives through persuasion and soft coercion rather than naked aggression, and have truly few irreconcilable divergences on vital issues, there may be room for some version of a stable equilibrium as a medium-term variant of success—one that is short of complete accommodation but that involves elements of mutual voluntary limitations. Even if transcending the rivalry is not feasible for the next several decades, stabilizing it could be an intermediate objective.

This will be difficult. As Shiffrinson’s essay in Appendix E notes, even well-meaning overtures can be spurned in rivalries. And the recent history of overtures to China on issues varying from military-to-military dialogue to arms control does not provide much reason for

¹⁰ Ryan Hass, “What America Wants from China: A Strategy to Keep Beijing Entangled in the World Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 6, November–December 2023.

¹¹ Hass, 2023.

¹² Hass, 2023.

optimism. This is where China's political and strategic mindset gets in the way: On issues of particular importance, Beijing often demands agreement with its own interpretation of issues as the price for cooperation and appears uninterested in issue-specific compromises absent such wider adherence to its demands. Calls for various forms of coexistence—some kind of long-term equilibrium that the United States and China can aspire to—do not necessarily reflect the seriousness of the rivalry or typical patterns of rivalry outcomes.

Many historical cases suggest that a stabilized but ongoing rivalry is not the same thing as sustainable coexistence. The difference lies in the degree of active, zero-sum competitive drive on both sides, as opposed to an implicit acceptance of mutual influence. Too often, the term *coexistence* is used to imply both kinds of outcomes—grudgingly becalmed, but intensely hostile, competition with minimal rules of stability, as opposed to a far more internalized mutual acceptance of norms and rules in a more-regulated competition. Not all kinds of coexistence are created equal.

From a U.S. perspective, one vision of medium-term success can involve creating the conditions for the kind of tipping point in the type of stable rivalry we just described. The rivalry would still be underway and could last decades. But a combination of U.S. policy, multilateral cooperation, intensifying Chinese weaknesses, systemic barriers to success, and policy missteps would lead to a period of several years during which the basic narrative of power transition would be replaced with a general recognition that China will never surpass the United States in total power terms, nor will it be in a position to achieve its more-elaborate goals (such as ejecting U.S. military presence from the region). In this case, the tipping point would reflect a version of success that does not demand the collapse or defeat of the rival. It would be a clear accumulation of evidence that the United States and its group of close allies and partners would remain decisively ahead of China in all major categories of national power and that this lead would now grow over time.

Third, a related insight is that *victory or defeat in individual battles or campaigns is not likely to determine the outcome of the rivalry*. History is clear that truly long-term great power rivalries can pass through many stages in which individual crises, battles, or even whole wars can occur and become merely smaller elements of a much bigger process. If they do not force a comprehensive defeat or compel surrender in some way, individual events need to be assessed to determine their importance for the larger rivalry. The United States was certain for a time that the outcome in Vietnam would be critical to the outcome of the Cold War; it was not. As Deak's case study of Austria-Hungary suggests, a great power that tries to respond decisively to every challenge and crisis will exhaust its attention and resources.

This finding has obvious significance for the most important security issue in the U.S.-China relationship: the question of Taiwan. Different scholars and observers hold divergent views about whether Taiwan will be a defining clash in the U.S.-China rivalry or merely one issue with highly meaningful human and strategic significance but not, on its own, an issue that is likely to decide the rivalry. At least in theory, by pursuing the elements of several definitions of success—including domestic dynamism and systemic predominance—the United States could still achieve overall success in the long-term rivalry whatever the outcome in

Taiwan. This is especially true if demographic and economic trends mean that China's relative power is likely to ebb rather than grow in the decades after a war over the island. Yet some argue that Chinese success in an invasion could trigger a very different cascade of events that would tilt the rivalry heavily against the United States.

At the moment, this question is mainly argued through sound bites and simple assertions. Generating a more-rigorous assessment of the likely strategic significance of this issue is an important priority. For the time being, finding a route to a stable equilibrium on this issue—within a larger, medium-term conception of success—is an urgent necessity for any U.S. approach to the rivalry.

Fourth, *for devising medium- and long-term conceptions of success in the current rivalry, history suggests that the United States would be best served by starting with the foundations—domestic societal dynamism and territorial security in all forms—and building outward from there.* This analysis reiterates the basic lesson of phase one of this study: An effective mix of societal characteristics and related sources of competitive advantage form the basis for all forms of success and an essential safeguard against most types of failure. The United States should view success in its bilateral rivalry with China as merely one component of a broader national strategy for dynamism and renewal. We outlined one approach to such a set of characteristics in phase one. Without such a potent domestic engine of competitive power, success in rivalries becomes far less likely, no matter the variety sought.

This requirement goes well beyond national investments in industries or research and development and is the focus of several recent pieces of U.S. legislation, such as the Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors and Science (CHIPS) Act and infrastructure bills that provide investment in renewable energy. Those are useful steps, but the sort of national renewal that is called for by this finding must eventually become much broader. To meet the areas of national competitiveness outlined in our earlier work, such an agenda must include steps to boost shared opportunity, mitigate political polarization, clear out bureaucratic ossification, and more. Absent a fairly comprehensive effort in these areas, the United States will not be able to realize its potential for success in the rivalry.

The general idea that accumulating weakness can cause one side to give up the competition is timeless and could begin to describe a weakening United States or China. That competition, Zack Cooper and Hal Brands argue, “could persist in a fairly intense form until the party loses its ability to prosecute it. This could come about due to either a decline in Chinese power or a fundamental change in the nature of the ruling regime.”¹³ They add that

[w]hat will ultimately end the Sino-American competition is the accumulated effect of the profound internal stresses China faces combined with consistent external resistance. If the United States and its allies and partners are successful in checking China's aggrandizement, then the combination of slowing economic growth, a growing debt bubble, a

¹³ Zack Cooper and Hal Brands, “America Will Only Win When China's Regime Fails,” *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2021.

slow-motion demographic catastrophe, and other internal domestic stresses could lead to a marked decline in China's ability to challenge the international order. In such a world, Beijing's hostility toward Washington could become less strategically problematic, even if hostility persists.¹⁴

The same basic rule holds for both contestants: accumulating domestic weakness is likely to be the primary cause of failure in the rivalry. Renewed domestic energy, dynamism, and solidarity, on the other hand, create the most essential foundation for success.

In terms of territorial security, the United States is in a strong position regarding the foundational requirement for great power success: preserving territorial integrity and avoiding conquest. A combination of geography, world-leading military power, and the possession of nuclear weapons means that the United States does not face a meaningful threat to this type of success. The obvious exception to this rule would be a war that escalates to nuclear attacks on the U.S. homeland. But homeland security today takes many forms that go beyond deterring invasion; protecting U.S. territory against forms of direct aggression short of invasion stands out as an important priority for establishing the foundations for success in rivalries, from cybersecurity to defense against long-range missile threats.

Fifth, *shaping the international system, in normative as well as institutional and material terms, is a critical strategic priority, but the United States must reconceptualize its goals and strategies for doing so.* Systemic predominance is one way of conceptualizing success, or at least a dominant route to achieving other versions of it. This is truer than ever in a highly interdependent world in which key technologies, materials, ideas, and labor can only be acquired through networked ties. The post-Cold War case provides a good example of the potential effect: Shiffrin's essay in Appendix E describes ways great powers shape the system with what he terms *quiet coercion*. Heath's discussion of China's system-shaping in Appendix B similarly describes how China historically went about this (but he also describes limits to current efforts to achieve hegemonic control in similar ways).

Partly, this means shaping the alignments and perspectives of other actors to turn the global balance of power toward U.S. norms. It means supporting other countries to sustain their freedom of action vis-à-vis China. But with rising alternative power centers and challenges to U.S. legitimacy, the United States will likely have to go about this task differently than it has, at least since 1990. Such an effort will demand compromises and concessions from the United States toward third parties, which it has been loath to grant, in an attempt to preserve unilateral control over many processes and outcomes.¹⁵ Paradoxically, achieving success in systemic terms in this rivalry appears likely to demand giving up control in some ways to gain long-term influence. What the United States seeks (as Heath's essay emphasizes) is not control but socialization, which is a surer route to eventual systemic power.

¹⁴ Cooper and Brands, 2021.

¹⁵ Hass makes this case in "What America Wants from China" (Hass, 2023).

The predominance of that power will be constrained compared with the heyday of U.S. systemic influence in the 1990s. In systemic terms, the United States is likely headed for some variety of a classic historical pattern: A formerly predominant great power, whose system influence has waned but that remains among the world's leaders. Many varieties of success are consistent with such an outcome, but only to the degree that the implications do not threaten the forms of systemic influence that are most essential to most types of great power success. These forms of influence are the ability to shape alignments of power to avoid a decisive hostile coalition, mitigate systemic sources of attack on the homeland, and avoid the collapse of a stable international economic system.

A sixth finding is that *international legitimacy is an important variable in the determination of rivalry outcomes*. Goddard's essay in Appendix D is instructive in this regard: Prussia wrapped its rise to power in a conception of legitimacy that it carefully cultivated with other European powers. China is clearly trying to do the same but appears to be failing, partly because its diplomacy and messaging is far clumsier and more aggressive than Prussia's. Heath's essay in Appendix B on the tribute system implies that China's goals today are unacceptable to its neighbors and that its heavy-handed diplomacy is triggering responses that suggest an ongoing failure in legitimacy-based power seeking. But Chinese (and Russian) narratives are resonating in much of the developing world, thus sustaining their legitimacy, while U.S. legitimacy is increasingly challenged.

Regaining a decisive advantage in legitimacy over revisionist powers will be especially difficult in an era of growing multipolarity. The inherent validity of U.S. messaging will never recover to its post-Cold War peak. Multiple centers of influence—India, Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and others—have an interest in shaping global narratives, and all are skeptical of U.S. claims and narratives. One of the major challenges for the United States, even beyond the requirements of the rivalry, is how to shape the normative and legitimacy environment at a time of normative pluralism.

Seventh, *in the pursuit of success in this rivalry, overreach will be self-defeating*. The history of great powers that sought success and failure in rivalries suggests a broad lesson: leaning into absolutist conceptions of rivalry success will be counterproductive. Overreacting to the other side's moves and seeking absolutist conceptions of security and control is ultimately self-defeating. The examples are legion, from ancient Athens' foray into Sicily, to Napoleon's lunge at European supremacy, to German and Japanese aggression in the 1930s, to the Soviet effort to control Eastern Europe and to project power globally on the back of a stagnant economy. This does not imply passivity as an alternative: Deak's discussion of the Austria-Hungary case describes the delicate balance between activism and restraint that is required to establish the foundations for success. It merely confirms that the strategic risks of overreach during a rivalry will demand husbanding resources for the right investments and the critical moments.

One particular danger of overreach—and a connection stressed by Paul Kennedy decades ago—is the potential damage to a country’s finances.¹⁶ Creating a sustainable foundation for U.S. competitive efforts is essential. One lesson of many great power rivalries, Lacey concludes, is that “the implications of these economic and financial” realities “are possibly enormous.”¹⁷ He goes on to say that

[the] cost of sustaining a prolonged militarized rivalry is going to absorb vastly larger sums as a percentage of a state’s GDP than historically has been the case. As such, the effect on the underlying economy of both rivals will be much broader, putting at risk the broad public support the states had previously enjoyed in historic rivalries.¹⁸

The side that finds ways to fund its efforts sustainably has a huge advantage.

Eighth, as it manages ongoing metrics of success and lays the foundation for a possible medium-term tipping point and a long-term transcension of the rivalry, *the United States must continue to place a strong emphasis on the preconditions for a stable equilibrium in an enduring rivalry*. An earlier RAND study identified critical components of stability in rivalries.¹⁹ The study found two essential preconditions for a stable rivalry: both sides agree to many elements of a shared status quo in areas of mutual concern, and a form of equilibrium exists that allows the relationship to weather crises and return to a stable mean. Arguably, both of these requirements are missing from U.S.-China relations today.

The RAND study also identified many specific variables that determine stability in a rivalry and that analysis suggests a clear agenda for stabilizing the U.S.-China competition. Useful steps could vary from avoiding the deployment of highly destabilizing and provocative weapons, to signaling acceptance of the other side’s essential legitimacy, to creating norms that bind the competition, to building personal relationships between national officials. The U.S. government has been pursuing many of these approaches, as recently as 2023, by encouraging multiple high-level official meetings to share perspectives. But preserving the equilibrium of the relationship will be extremely challenging, given the mutual threat perceptions, and will take strenuous effort.

Ninth and finally, as they pursue a strategy for the rivalry with China, U.S. leaders and officials should keep in mind that *relative to many historical rivalries, there would appear to be limits on how badly the United States can fail in the competition with China, at least in terms of the bilateral contest for power and influence*. As noted above, geography, nuclear weapons, and the limits to China’s expeditionary power combine to eliminate any prospect of the United States being conquered and occupied territorially, its capital seized by an invading force. As many societal challenges as the United States may have, it continues to display

¹⁶ Kennedy, 1989.

¹⁷ Lacey, 2020b, p. 33.

¹⁸ Lacey, 2020b, p. 33.

¹⁹ Mazarr et al., 2021.

far more evidence of continuing growth and dynamism than earlier powers, whose domestic decline led to comprehensive failure. The United States has too many value-sharing allies that are also menaced by Chinese belligerence to be isolated in the international system.

The most worrying prospects for failure lie at the opposite ends of the spectrum of an intensifying rivalry. At one end, a contest that escalates to all-out war would threaten the U.S. homeland with destruction. The result would not be a relative loss to a victorious China, but it would rank among the most disastrous outcomes for any great power in history. At the other end of the spectrum, political changes that cause the United States to abandon most of its commitments in the rivalry could produce dramatic Chinese advantages that amount to a form of loss—even if the homeland remains secure. In that case, the question would be whether a retrenched and aloof United States could maintain its freedom and prosperity after turning over its dominant role in much of world politics to an autocratic Marxist-Leninist regime.

Interestingly, the same outcomes might be true for China. Compared with some of the extreme outcomes offered by historical cases, in the current rivalry—absent the disastrous potential for nuclear conflict—there could be significant bounds on just how badly China could fail. Its territorial integrity (apart from the contested area of Taiwan) is not in peril; it does not stand to be conquered or subjugated in any meaningful way. The country's size and exploding technological sophistication mean that, even with long-term demographic decline, China is unlikely to become a future Sweden or Netherlands in terms of geopolitical heft.

These limits to the bounds of potential failure for both the United States and China could underwrite the basis for some degree of ongoing compromise. If it becomes gradually apparent that each side is mostly protected against the worst classic rivalry outcomes (again, assuming the risk of total war is avoided), these countries could eventually feel secure enough to offer mutual assurances and concessions that ease the competition. The agenda we suggest in the following section to move from hostile coexistence to a more stable outcome builds on this basic insight.

Pursuing the Preconditions for Long-Term Success

Figure 3.2 summarizes much of the preceding analysis into a three-part conception of success in the U.S. rivalry with China. The first part involves seeking measures of success as the rivalry proceeds, a task that requires a delicate balance between competing vigorously and preserving stability. The second part is defining and working toward a favorable tipping point in the rivalry as a medium-term objective. Finally, the third part involves laying the groundwork for an eventual transcendence of the rivalry into some form of stable peace.

As already noted, the prospects for an eventual outcome of stable peace appear very far off today. But history suggests that even the bitterest of rivalries can progress to such a stage and can do so without necessarily going to war. Figure 3.2 includes key policies that our research suggests will be essential preconditions for such a strategy: responses that are common across

FIGURE 3.2

Elements of a Multiphase Conception of Forms of Success in the U.S. Rivalry with China



the phases and steps that are specific to each one. We also stress factors that are beyond the agency of the United States: Even the best strategy for the rivalry is not guaranteed to succeed in any of these ways, depending on other developments.

Evaluating the wisdom of the current strategy—whether the United States is appreciating some of the insights we have outlined and is sensibly calibrating the balance between confrontation and conciliation to achieve medium- and long-term versions of success—is beyond the scope of this report. Our analysis does suggest, however, three general themes

that can help inform U.S. strategy. The first highlights the risk that the United States could rush into an array of combative steps without understanding how those steps contribute to true long-term success. Great powers that are made anxious and desperate by the pressure of such contests have often adopted policies that were too impulsive and ill-defined, guided by a zero-sum mindset destined to impede every action by their rival. An ad hoc, uncoordinated, and piecemeal approach to the rivalry has very real dangers.

The second theme also suggests that the most essential foundations for success come from positive steps rather than confrontational ones. Taking necessary domestic actions to renew U.S. dynamism, shaping the international system with a positive and inclusive vision, making additional investments to shape global narratives, and deepening existing alliances and partnerships would, together, sharply limit the potential for U.S. failure. All of those steps have intrinsic value that is independent of the U.S.-China rivalry and can be the foundation of a U.S. strategy that does not need to make countering Chinese power its central message.

Third and finally, our analysis suggests that peaceful, transformative success in rivalries occurs when a great power convinces its rival to interpret the necessary means of achieving its objectives in ways that do not threaten the great power's interests. This is the ultimate U.S. task in the current rivalry: to persuade an impatient, prideful, and somewhat belligerent China to understand its identity and that the best strategies for achieving its goals and advancing its interests are in ways that do not pose a threat to U.S. power and interests. The PRC of today is not prepared to make such a mindset transition, and the United States is not likely to unilaterally declare the rivalry over and withdraw from many of its competitive activities. But it is critical to think about the long-term future—partly to understand the conditions under which a great power will decide to reinterpret its strategy.

Our analysis suggests that such a transformation can occur through some combination of geopolitical events or realizations. It can occur when a great power is defeated in war or when a clear gap emerges between a great power's societal capacities and the demands of the competitive paradigm. Such a transformation can arise when a great power is forced to acknowledge that the objective national power of a rival is accelerating past its position in ways that cannot be arrested. A great power can grasp the need for change when clear evidence emerges that its strategy is generating international failure. Finally, and most hopefully, the basis for a transformation in a rivalry can occur when the great power sees, or at least hopes for, an alternative path within the rivalry to achieve its essential goals.

The U.S. strategy for its rivalry with China can be partly understood as an effort to set the conditions for one or more of those realizations. Again, the most essential steps to achieve such a goal are reflected in the positive agenda: renewed domestic dynamism combined with a fresh, but revised, model of global systemic and normative leadership. Over time, the effective pursuit of such an agenda would undermine any faith in China that its model and approach were destined to surpass the United States and the West. In more directly competitive terms, setting the conditions for an ultimate accommodation must deny China routes to objective societal-technological-military domination that would

instill confidence that China is achieving its goals, as well as support other states in holding the line on Chinese coercion.

At the same time, such a strategy must establish routes to alternative Chinese conceptions of success, creating a persuasive vision of what accommodation could look like in ways that meet core Chinese interests. This will in part require the United States to speak more openly and consistently about the potential for transcending the rivalry—what it would look like, how it would respect China’s status and interests, and what unique benefits it would bring for Beijing. Reassuring a rival about the shape of a potential accommodation is an essential component of any transition to a stable peace.

Again, it is obvious that such a mindset shift is a long way off for CCP leadership. A decision to seek a stable peace with the United States may be beyond the capacity of the current Chinese system. But history suggests that it is not impossible for even bitter great power rivals to arrive at a point at which they see the self-interest in transcending the contest. Moreover, across a time frame of three to five decades, dramatic changes in China’s domestic situation or international conditions could create the necessary elements for such a shift. In the meantime, the task for U.S. strategy is to preserve the stability of the relationship while establishing the conditions for long-term changes in the relationship.

Both of these proposed conceptions—seeking a stable equilibrium in the medium term and laying out a more concrete vision of a transcended rivalry in the longer term—speak to a world in which the United States and China have learned to coexist in a sustainable way. A great deal of current Chinese behavior complicates this task immensely: The PRC has aggressive goals and is seeking degrees of coercive influence over its neighbors and others that must be countered. But the United States has immense natural advantages in that task. It has rightly moved to undertake many competitive steps to balance Chinese ambitions in recent years. It may now be an appropriate time—informed by the lessons of history in strategic rivalries—to take a step back and begin to design the elements of a near-term equilibrium and a long-term model of coexistence.

Case Study: Steering or Preventing Change? Austria-Hungary's Varieties of Success and Failure Before World War I, 1900–1914

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Case Study Summary

This case study examines Austria-Hungary's approach to succeeding in rivalry in the years before 1914. It is not a comprehensive history of Austria-Hungary's relationship with other great powers but, like all the case studies, sought to provide insight on systemic dynamics and how they played into success and failure. This case study focuses on Austria-Hungary's policies toward Serbia as an avenue for outlining essential strategies for success.

When I analyze the varieties of strategic success and failure of great powers, my attention focuses on the historical case of Austria-Hungary before WWI. Here, we have the case of a great power, but certainly a great power of the second rank. Its relative position among the great powers had certainly declined in the years following its defeat by Prussia in 1866. The arms race that emerged after 1905 and the international competition between Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Russia also threatened to leave it further behind.¹ Still, in Eastern and Central Europe, Austria-Hungary was a very important political player. With the stark decline of the Ottoman Empire over the course of the 19th and into the 20th century, the Habsburg Empire played an important role in maintaining peace and stability in the Balkans. This position entangled it in local and regional politics and eventually destabilized the great power system of Europe, leading to WWI.

In many ways the ending to this story (the tragedy of the First World War) has colored how we view everything that came before: Austria-Hungary is seen as a threatened power,

¹ David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914*, Clarendon Press, 1996.

one that unleashed a war to make a last-ditch effort to preserve its crumbling empire.² But, as I have argued elsewhere, such a reading not only fundamentally misses the real motivations and understandings of the policymakers in Austria-Hungary before the First World War, it precludes us from seeing Austria-Hungary as offering relevant lessons today.³

First and foremost, recent shifts within Habsburg historiography have forced a reckoning to reevaluate the foreign policy of the empire. Habsburg studies as a field has pointed to the need to dispense with the idea that the Habsburg Empire was doomed to dissolution. In fact, the politics of the empire—replete with scenes of parliamentary obstruction and pandemonium in each of the empire’s two parliaments—should be interpreted as more integrative than previously thought.⁴ The hard political fights in the parliaments were a result of citizens imagining their future—and fighting for that future—within the empire.⁵ Moreover, the idea that the Habsburg Empire’s internal politics determined its foreign policy decisions does not adequately reflect how the empire’s foreign political decisions were being made, nor what the policymakers actively thought about them. Like other modern states at the time, the Habsburg Empire’s foreign politics were under constant rigorous debate internally, and domestic politics and foreign politics influenced one another. But national politics was just one of the factors that impelled the Habsburg policymakers, and it was of a lower order than what were perceived as larger questions regarding trade, investment, security, and territorial integrity.⁶ Thus, there is little to suggest that the empire could not continue on well into the future, if its development had not been interrupted by the First World War.

In other words, the Habsburg Empire’s foreign policy challenges and responses are particularly important for understanding why this empire collapsed in the First World War. But they can also offer us much food for thought today. In particular, we can point to the Habsburg Empire’s different strategies for dealing with instability in the Balkans in the decade and a half before WWI as showcasing different varieties of success and failure. And we have various approaches to instability produced on occasions by three distinct Habsburg imperial foreign ministers: Agenor Gołuchowski (1895 to 1906), Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal (1906 to 1912), and Leopold Berchtold (1912 to 1915).

² Lewis B. Namier, “The Downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy,” in Harold W. V. Temperley, ed., *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, Vol. 4, Henry Frowde and Hodder & Stoughton, 1921; A. J. P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809–1918. A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary*, Hamish Hamilton, 1948.

³ John Deak, “The Great War and the Forgotten Realm: The Habsburg Monarchy and the First World War,” *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 86, No. 2, June 2014.

⁴ Gary B. Cohen, “Neither Absolutism nor Anarchy: New Narratives on Society and Government in Late Imperial Austria,” *Austrian History Yearbook*, Vol. 29, No. 1, January 1998; Lothar Höbelt, “Parliamentary Politics in a Multinational Setting: Late Imperial Austria,” Center for Austrian Studies, University of Minnesota, Working Paper 92-6, March 1992.

⁵ Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, Harvard University Press, 2016.

⁶ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Allen Lane, 2012, Chapter 2.

Each of these foreign ministers worked in a multipolar system framed by the idea of the Concert of Europe—cooperation and negotiation among Europe's great powers.⁷ The "Concert," by the end of the century, consisted of the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. There were always winners and losers in this Concert, but even that was relative. Austria, under the leadership of Clemens von Metternich following the Napoleonic Wars, was a leading architect of this system. But by the 1890s, this system had come under strain. Instability in the Ottoman Empire, with frequent revolts, massacres, international outcries, and interventions, seemed to bring Balkan crises or flashpoints to the foreign minister's desk on a yearly basis. The Austrian foreign minister had prestige, commercial interests and infrastructure, and Austria-Hungary's own borders to maintain in these critical moments.

For the most part, Habsburg foreign policy was conservative: maintain the status quo, ensure stability in the Balkans, and expand trade and commercial networks. In other words, the Habsburg Empire's idea of success in the field of international security meant peace and calm. It needed peace and stability to increase the wealth of its citizens and thus the basis for collecting taxes. From there, it could improve its military capability and power and maintain or improve its status among the Great Powers. But these varieties of success were indeed long-term views. The foreign ministers of the Habsburg Empire pursued different strategies to attain these larger ends between 1900 and 1914. These strategies were not in all respects mutually exclusive, either. They can be defined in large part by the following two strategies: responding to every crisis or taking the lead. A third strategy can be summarized as *steering change*. This strategy differed from the other two in its acceptance of alterations to the status quo. Instead of resisting change—a strategy implicit in the first two strategies—this third strategy either instigates change or seeks to manage it from a safe distance.

Responding to every crisis and taking the lead, as well as steering change, also have two sub-elements, which were mutually exclusive: coordinating the Concert of Europe or going it alone.

Although the foreign ministers pursued the larger goal of peace and security (i.e., success) through these strategies, how they related this goal to the concept of *change* and how flexible they were with the concept of *stability* enabled them to either pursue their objectives with calm ease or anxiety. It also determined how successful they were at ensuring the Habsburg Empire within the multipolar and nervous system of the great powers before the First World War.

The first variety of success under the leadership of Agenor Gołuchowski (foreign minister from 1895 to 1906) is summed up by the goal of *preserving the status quo through resisting change*. This meant responding to every crisis, seeking commonalities with the other great powers, and continually working to produce ends defined by the Concert of Europe. In sum,

⁷ René Albrecht-Carrié, *The Concert of Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1968, pp. 1–24; F. R. Bridge and Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European States System 1815–1914*, Longman, 1980; Richard Langhorne, *The Collapse of the Concert of Europe: International Politics, 1890–1914*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1981.

Gołuchowski pursued policies of (1) responding to every crisis and (2) taking the lead, along with the tactic of (a) coordinating the Concert of Europe.

The second course, put in place by Foreign Minister Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal (1906 to 1912), can be summarized by the concept of *steering change*. The key issue here is that Aehrenthal hoped to abandon the concept of resisting change and instead opted for a policy of accepting change as a matter of course but steering it toward good outcomes. Aehrenthal adopted a go-it-alone strategy but soon retreated into the Concert of Europe to coordinate and support changes to the status quo to benefit the empire. The third strategy, adopted by Leopold Berchtold (foreign minister from 1912 to 1915) was beset by the Italo-Turkish and Balkan Wars. Berchtold reestablished the policy of resisting change, but instead of seeking cooperation like Gołuchowski, he often adopted the policy of (1) responding to every crisis but without seeking the aid of the Concert; that is, he also (2) took the lead but (b) went alone. This proved to be exhausting and led to the fateful decision to initiate the First World War.

How the Habsburg foreign ministers enacted this policy, which in its broad strategy was consistent between 1900 and 1914, varied. Habsburg foreign policy altered between resisting change, steering change, and resisting change by going it alone. As we will see, these strategies of pursuing peace and stability had different levels of success.

Gołuchowski: Preserving the Status Quo with the Concert of Europe

Agenor Gołuchowski's activities as foreign minister consisted of trying to preserve the status quo and maintain the Concert's cooperation. The chief challenge was instability in the Balkans and coordinating responses to the increasing decline of Turkey—which meant dealing with massacres of Armenians, an uprising and terrorism in Macedonia, and Bulgarian overtures of independence. It also meant that, among the great powers, Gołuchowski aimed to maintain the status quo and peace and stability on Austria-Hungary's southeastern border by preventing change. This approach adopted the strategy aims of keeping Russia from gaining control of Constantinople and the Turkish straits (which would have given Russian ships unlimited access to the Mediterranean) and keeping Italy from becoming a power in the Western Balkans (which would have rivaled the economic goals of Austria-Hungary there). Finally, Gołuchowski was at pains to keep Serbia dependent on Austria-Hungary for trade and kept it from gaining access to the Adriatic Sea by maintaining its territorial separation from Montenegro. But such a negative policy of resisting change and attempting to use the Concert system to do this work for Austria-Hungary meant that Gołuchowski had to react to every event or destabilizing moment as if it were a major crisis.

Gołuchowski's policy of continuing to try to arrange the Concert of Europe meant, for the most part, responding to every crisis in the Balkans and in the Eastern Mediterranean. He had larger goals too, but the response to every crisis meant that sudden shifts in tactics opened up new crises or problems elsewhere. For instance, the strategy of peace and stability

in the Balkans led Gołuchowski to pursue a larger détente with Russia. In the process, eager to prove Austria's independence from Germany, he also loosened his support for Balkan policies from Berlin. Germany threw up tariff boundaries on foreign goods in 1902, which cut into Austria's trade with Germany, where it sent 52 per cent of its largely agrarian exports. In the meantime, crises in the Ottoman Empire—a massacre of the Armenians in 1896 and a rebellion in Macedonia in 1903—prompted Gołuchowski to intervene and to try to coordinate the Concert to get on board with Austrian-led solutions. When the Macedonian rebellion produced a brutal response by the Ottomans (and, really, atrocities committed by all sides), Austria-Hungary felt forced to intervene. In response, Gołuchowski produced the Mürzsteg Agreement with Russia in October 1903. This agreement, according to historian F. R. Bridge, “envisaged . . . stringent control of the Ottoman authorities” by means of a Russian and Austro-Hungarian civil agent on the ground.⁸ A gendarmerie was to be created under the international control of the Great Powers. The Mürzsteg Agreement was, diplomatically, a success—at least from afar—but maintaining cooperation seemed to be Gołuchowski's job. And the realities of the agreement, which stipulated that administrative districts would be drawn up along ethnic lines, meant that ethnic cleansing helped make those lines appear clearer. Finally, since the job of managing the police fell to Italy, Gołuchowski seemed to spend much of 1904 trying to keep Italy from using the position to its own geopolitical advantage in the Balkans.

Things became worse for Gołuchowski when new, real crises threatened Austria-Hungary's position in the Balkans. Serbia had been a client state of Austria since its independence in 1878. But after the young King Alexander married a woman with a less than stellar reputation and indicated abrupt changes in political course, a group of officers in the Serbian army sought to depose him and install a king from a rival dynasty. The conspirators brutally murdered Alexander, his wife Draga, and both the prime minister and the minister of the army overnight on June 11, 1903.⁹ Austria-Hungary at first assumed relations would be good, but the new king, Petar, largely left foreign policy to the regicides and the radicals who ushered him into power. It was at this point that relations between the two states soured.¹⁰ The new king, beholden to the regicides, allowed Serbian politics to be steered away from a friendly relationship with Austria-Hungary to one of conflict.

Austria-Hungary's response to the crisis with Serbia was an attempt to maintain the status quo by going it alone. Gołuchowski aimed to keep Serbia as a subordinate client and trading partner. When Serbia signed an agreement with Bulgaria that Austria did not review first, Austria-Hungary closed its borders to Serbian livestock, which had been typically slaughtered in Hungarian slaughterhouses. After four years of an economic standoff—known as the Pig War because of the veterinary examinations that Austria-Hungary demanded for Ser-

⁸ F. R. Bridge, *From Sadowa to Sarajevo: The Foreign Policy of Austria-Hungary, 1866–1914*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 265.

⁹ Clark, 2012, Chapter 1.

¹⁰ Bridge, 1972, pp. 262–263.

bian pigs—Serbia invested in its own slaughterhouses with foreign loans from France. Moreover, Germany, Austria-Hungary's ally, stepped in to take up the share of trade that had been Austria-Hungary's.¹¹ The result was that Serbia became less dependent on Austria-Hungary and that Austria-Hungary could not count on its ally to have its back in these minor crises.

Gołuchowski's tenure as foreign minister followed two strategies for the larger goal of pursuing peace and stability. In dealing with Serbia, he pursued a direct approach without the Concert. In the larger policy reflecting the Balkans, he responded to every crisis and hoped to secure the efforts of the Concert to the plans and agreements he made. Neither strategy was particularly effective. In both scenarios, Gołuchowski's efforts were undercut by his allies. Italy tried to use the interventions in Macedonia to expand its foothold in the Balkans, directly bringing it into diplomatic conflict with Austria-Hungary; Germany, likewise, undermined Austria-Hungary's efforts to economically bring Serbia into line by taking up the trade that Austria-Hungary left on the table.

Aehrenthal: Learning to Steer Change

Gołuchowski's successor, Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal, followed a much different pursuit of the same larger goals by loosening up much of the rigidity of what status quo could mean. In effect, when Aehrenthal became foreign minister in 1906, he turned away from Gołuchowski's strategy of attempting to hold back change at every turn. Instead, he was more focused on proving Austria-Hungary's independence from Germany and its vigor as a great power. This too backfired in significant ways. But he was eventually able to right the ship and pursue Austria-Hungary's interests in preserving the status quo by steering change rather than trying to prevent it at every turn.

Aehrenthal's first major coup was the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908. Maybe a little backstory is in order here. Austria-Hungary occupied and administered Bosnia-Herzegovina following the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. For 30 years, Bosnia existed as a quasi-military colony that was increasingly integrated into the rest of the empire economically. But in 1908, when the Young Turk rebellion overthrew the sultan's government and called for all of the Ottoman territories to be represented in a central parliament, Austria's officials feared that Bosnia would be asked to send representatives. Moreover, the status quo for Bosnia also seemed untenable. With the proclamation of parliamentary representation and the reinstatement of the Ottoman constitution of 1876, Bosnia-Herzegovina took the stage as the only territory in Europe without some kind of constitution or representation. So, Aehrenthal moved to annex the two occupied provinces with the announcement that the Austro-Hungarian government would prepare a constitution for the new "imperial land" soon.

In essence, to preserve the larger goal of peace and stability, Aehrenthal became more open to change. This meant having a much more flexible definition of what was meant by

¹¹ Bridge, 1972, pp. 278–280.

the status quo. The annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, quickly isolated Austria-Hungary from the other great powers, who bristled at Austria-Hungary's unilateralism. But Aehrenthal changed tactics once again.

At first, Aehrenthal managed the crisis by going alone. Although he received a promise from the Russian Foreign Minister Alexander Izvolsky for a friendly stance toward the annexation, Aehrenthal did not wait for Izvolsky to inform Tsar Nicholas II or the rest of the Russian cabinet. While Izvolsky was visiting foreign ministers on a tour, the annexation happened almost immediately after Bulgaria declared independence (Bulgaria, too, wanted to escape any destabilizing notions that its peoples would be represented in Constantinople). What happened next was a mix of hubris and cunning, on the one hand, and a series of unforeseen consequences on the other. While Izvolsky tried to deny his agreement with Aehrenthal, Aehrenthal put him in a diplomatic corner, threatening to expose Russia's various agreements with Austria regarding the Balkans. The tsar and the Russian cabinet were, in the meantime, furious with their foreign minister for giving Bosnia and Herzegovina away without getting much of anything in return. Izvolsky could not deny the agreement, but he also could not get the backing of the tsar for it either. So, in many ways, Izvolsky had to choose between losing face or exposing his country as selling out the southern Slavic peoples. Either way, Izvolsky had to eat crow.¹² While Aehrenthal celebrated his victory, however, the other Entente Powers—France and Britain—argued that an international conference should be held to decide what sort of compensation ought to be given to the Ottoman Empire. When Izvolsky pressed for this, Aehrenthal released the minutes of confidential meetings that had been held with Russia dating back to the 1880s. Izvolsky had been thoroughly beaten, but he was now—more than ever—a stubborn opponent of anything that Aehrenthal did.¹³

In the end, going it alone with the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina did two things in the short term. First, it made Austria-Hungary more reliant on Germany in matters of foreign policy because the rest of the great powers isolated Austria diplomatically. But second, it forced Aehrenthal to adopt a new policy vis-à-vis upholding the status quo.

When going it alone seemed less efficacious, Aehrenthal changed tactics again. After the Bosnia-Herzegovina annexation crisis of 1908–1909, Aehrenthal presented Austria-Hungary as a satiated power whose policy was to maintain the status quo.¹⁴ This seemed to follow in the footsteps of Gołuchowski with significant but subtle differences. In practice, however, Aehrenthal did not follow his predecessor's course of responding vigorously to every crisis. He took a largely hands-off approach to the Balkans, discouraging attempts by Romania to stir up claims against Bosnia and pretensions by Serbia to occupy the Sanjak of Novi Pazar—the strip of land between Serbia and Montenegro.¹⁵ This also, more famously, brought

¹² Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *The Annexation of Bosnia, 1908–1909*, Howard Fertig, 1970.

¹³ Bridge, 1972, pp. 305–306.

¹⁴ Bridge, 1972, p. 324.

¹⁵ Bridge, 1972, pp. 324–330.

Aehrenthal in conflict with the Austro-Hungarian Chief of the General Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf.¹⁶ Conrad continually pestered Aehrenthal and the emperor for preemptive wars against Serbia and Italy. Eventually, Aehrenthal was able to get Emperor Franz Joseph to dismiss him from his post.¹⁷

In a way, steering a middle course through all of these crises allowed them to ebb and flow without destabilizing the monarchy's internal politics and allowing Aehrenthal to both accept change and steer it toward the best outcomes. His handling of the Morocco Crisis of 1911 is a case in point. When Germany demanded territorial compensation from France when the latter militarily intervened in Morocco, Aehrenthal played the disinterested mediator and—taking hits from hawks on both sides—helped both come to an agreement in the Franco-German accord.¹⁸ In this case, sitting back and framing the debate—a debate that other powers were having between themselves—helped win Austria goodwill abroad. But steering change is easier when one's own interests are not directly affected.

Italy's invasion of the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in September 1911 sparked another case for steering change. When Italy announced on November 5 that it had annexed the two provinces—while there was still active resistance by the Ottoman army—Aehrenthal decided that playing the leading role of mediator to settle the conflict would be a hopeless task, even though Italy's war threatened to stir up unrest in the Balkans, which would more directly involve Austria-Hungary in a crisis. Instead, he reignited the Concert of Europe to settle the conflict and made friends in the United Kingdom and even Italy as a result. Moreover, Aehrenthal kept Russia from benefiting from the conflict. But here again, unlike his predecessor, who took the lead and spent much of his diplomatic energy on getting the other powers to stay in tune with the Concert, Aehrenthal let the other powers do too much of the work for him, using the conditions and the interests of the other great powers as much as possible to prevent Russia from settling the conflict on its own terms.¹⁹

All of this played into the notion of not resisting change but *steering* it and involving other powers often as a means of playing them off against one another. This approach helped Austria out of its isolation quickly after the Bosnian crisis. In a few ways, Aehrenthal expended less energy than his predecessor and certainly less than his successor. Aehrenthal held to the

¹⁶ Unfortunately, Solomon Wank did not complete his planned multivolume biography of Aehrenthal. The published volume remains edited but not fully fleshed out (Solomon Wank, *In the Twilight of Empire: Count Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal (1854–1912), Imperial Habsburg Patriot and Statesman: Vol. 2, From Foreign Minister in Waiting to De Facto Chancellor*, ed. by Franz Adlgasser, Mária Höhn, and Alexander Knaak, Böhlau, Verlag, 2020, Chapter 16). For more on Aehrenthal's rivalry with Conrad von Hötzendorf over Balkan (and Italian) policy, see Solomon Wank, "Political Versus Military Thinking in Austria-Hungary, 1908–1912," *Peace & Change*, Vol. 7, Nos. 1–2, January 1981.

¹⁷ Lawrence Sondhaus, *Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf: Architect of the Apocalypse*, Humanities Press, 2000, p. 105; Solomon Wank, "Some Reflections on the Habsburg Empire and Its Legacy in the Nationalities Question," *Austrian History Yearbook*, Vol. 28, January 1997.

¹⁸ Bridge, 1972, pp. 333–334.

¹⁹ Bridge, 1972, pp. 334–339.

larger goal of maintaining peace and stability, expanding trade, and—as much as possible—maintaining the status quo. But, his policy allowed more waves to stir the waters, and he let others help keep the ship of the great powers afloat. In essence, Aehrenthal allowed for change and even caused diplomatic change himself. He did not resist change by responding to every single crisis; he produced the changes himself, let the international order calm the storm, and came out on top. He also worked to steer policy from the middle of the Concert and did not try to produce treaties and documents, on which he and his diplomatic team would have had to spend energy trying to enforce. Thus, by allowing for and accepting change, Aehrenthal was able to keep his field of play more open and maintained the larger goal of guiding Europe to status quo policies. This was the case despite displaying a seemingly more active foreign policy.

Leopold Berchtold: Earnest Interventions

Aehrenthal died of leukemia on February 17, 1912, and his successor had to deal with crises that would have challenged even Aehrenthal. But Leopold Berchtold was, for all his earnestness, probably not the right person for the job. He, too, kept to the overall strategy of maintaining the status quo, but events made that line much more difficult to maintain. Unable to follow Aehrenthal's course of steering and accepting change, Berchtold reverted to the efforts of Gofuchowski in several ways, mainly by responding to every crisis. In a sense, Berchtold brought back a rigidity in foreign policy that resisted all change, instead of allowing change to benefit Austria-Hungary. A key difference in Berchtold's deployment of this strategy was that by the beginning of 1913, he was convinced that Austria-Hungary should do the heavy lifting to maintain the status quo.

By the time the Italo-Turkish War ended, the governments of Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Greece formed the Balkan League, which was determined to knock the Ottoman Empire out of Europe and to claim those territories for its own benefit. Berchtold tried to take the lead to defuse war before it began but was rebuffed by Germany and the Entente. Berchtold's proposal that the Entente Powers unite the Concert to give the Ottoman Empire time to institute decentralization reforms in the Balkans only convinced the Balkan League that they had better attack sooner rather than later.²⁰ The First Balkan War began in October 1912, the day after the Ottoman Empire officially ended the war with Italy.²¹

Austro-Hungarian policy in 1912 centered on a few major points: forcing Serbia to earn any territorial gains through promises of good behavior, closer economic cooperation with Austria and—negative goal—no access to the sea.

²⁰ Bridge, 1972, p. 344.

²¹ Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912–1913: Prelude to the First World War*, Routledge, 2000; Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., *The Making of the Twentieth Century: Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*, Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1991, Chapter 7.

Even Berchtold was able to steer change in this challenging situation. In this case, he allowed the UK Foreign Minister Edward Grey to do the work for him by hosting an informal conference of great power ambassadors in London—an ambassadors' reunion, as it was called in the press. On the one hand, Austria-Hungary could count on Germany and Italy to advocate for its policies vis-à-vis Serbia. The ambassadors decided—purely academically, of course—that there should be an independent Albania that would hold the coastal territories between Montenegro and Greece—territories that Serbia desired for itself. A key sticking point was the city of Scutari (Shkodër in Albanian). The city was ethnically Albanian, but Russia, hoping to achieve wins against Austria-Hungary, wanted it to go to Montenegro. In response, Austria-Hungary put its units in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Dalmatia on a war footing. Scutari was saved for the Albanians in the end but at the cost of other Albanian territory. When Montenegro refused to agree to the Entente Powers decision and continued to besiege Scutari, the Concert dithered. Russia refused to support any effort to force Montenegro to stop, and France was disinclined to bring Russia into line. Austria-Hungary coordinated with Italy and mobilized its troops to eject Russia from Montenegro. Austria-Hungary acted alone and without much support among its allies, let alone the Concert.²²

Berchtold seemed to learn the lesson that Austria-Hungary must act alone and forcefully to protect its interests. Bridge even writes that Berchtold became “disillusioned with Concert diplomacy,” largely because of Russian intransigence to reaching any kind of diplomatic resolution.²³ But such a policy returned Austria-Hungary to reacting to every moment instead of steering change. Austria-Hungary threatened war with Serbia again in fall 1913, forcing the smaller nation-state to evacuate the Albanian territory it was loath to give up.²⁴

Responding to every crisis led to two important developments in 1913, of which both could have been short term if they had not led to war. First, Austria-Hungary acting alone, resolute in its willingness to defend its own interests at every turn, actually kept it from coordinating policy with its allies. In many ways, Germany was Austria-Hungary's largest commercial competitor in the Balkans and took advantage of Austria-Hungary's strong stances on principle to continue to expand its own trade. But Germany also was not brought in on Austria-Hungary's larger Balkan strategy to prevent a new Balkan League from turning its attention toward the empire. This brings me to a second and larger point, one that directly connects with the larger decision for war—responding to every crisis also had an emotional cost: diplomatic exhaustion.²⁵

²² Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., “Military Dimensions of Habsburg-Romanov Relations During the Era of the Balkan Wars,” in Béla K. Király and Dimitrije Djordjević, eds., *War and Society in East Central Europe*: Vol. XVIII, *East Central European Society and the Balkan Wars*, Social Science Monographs, 1987.

²³ Bridge, 1972, p. 352.

²⁴ Bridge, 1972, p. 359.

²⁵ Tellingly, a work by a Walter Rauscher calls Berchtold's policy the “strategy of permanent crisis” [“Kriesenstrategie in Permanenz”] (Walter Rauscher, *Die Fragile Grossmacht: Die Donaumonarchie und die*

Concluding Thoughts

After more than a century since the fall of the empire, Foreign Minister Aehrenthal still enjoys a rather good reputation. It is interesting to wonder what a policy of steering change would have meant for the crises in the Balkans that came soon after his death in 1912. In several ways, Aehrenthal redefined the strategy of success to adapt to a global system that could not provide the Habsburg Empire with a guarantee of the status quo. The Ottoman Empire would be pushed out of Europe—How should the Habsburg Empire have responded? Aehrenthal took what he could in the process. He shored up the Habsburg coastline by annexing what the empire already occupied. This angered Serbia, but Serbia was forced to turn its attention southward to the Balkan League. In contrast, both Gołuchowski and Berchtold had a much more rigid version of maintaining the status quo as a variety of success. In the end, Gołuchowski and Berchtold pursued several larger strategies to do this, but those were boiled down to two main strategies that were not mutually exclusive: (1) responding to every crisis and (2) taking the lead. Taking the lead also had two sub-elements: (a) coordinating the Concert and (b) going it alone. Both strategies of taking the lead and responding to every crisis proved to be exhausting to Habsburg policymakers and diplomats, and by 1914, the strategies had led them to declare war.

By the time Franz Ferdinand, the heir-presumptive to the Habsburg throne, was buried in July 1914, the decision to go to war was made fairly easily. Among the crisis cabinet that convened around Emperor Franz Joseph, only the Hungarian Prime Minister István Tisza did not immediately decide for war. The Habsburg Empire was willing to risk disaster—a war with Russia—in order to have a final reckoning with Serbia and Montenegro. This was not, on the whole, a rational decision. But the strategies of trying to maintain the status quo by responding to every crisis and going it alone meant that, by summer 1914, the possibility of a larger war beyond the Balkans seemed worth the risk. And the war, when it did come, was hailed as a “great release,” a release from the tensions that had been building and from the frayed nerves of crisis management from one issue to the next.²⁶ But entering into a risky strategy in order to finally stop engaging in crisis diplomacy is a great modern example of making a mountain out of a molehill. In the end, the conflagration that was brought on by the empire’s decisions would also bring about its end.

Europäische Staatenwelt 1866–1914 [*The Fragile Great Power: The Danube Monarchy and the European World of States*], Vols. 1 and 2, Peter Lang, 2014, Vol. 2, pp. 752–812).

²⁶ Günther Kronenbitter, “‘Nur los lassen’: Österreich-Ungarn und der Wille zum Krieg” [“Just Let Go’: Austria-Hungary and the Will to Go to War”], in Johannes Burkhardt, Josef Becker, Stig Förster, and Günther Kronenbitter, *Lange und kurze Wege in den Ersten Weltkrieg: Vier Augsburger Beiträge zur Kriegsursachenforschung* [*Long and Short Paths to the First World War: Four Augsburg Contributions to Research into the Causes of War*], Vögel, 1996.

Case Study: China's Tribute System: A Model of Success in Rivalries?

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Case Study Summary

This case study focuses even more explicitly on systemic dynamics than the others. It examines how premodern China developed a regional architecture of predominance, commonly known as the *tribute system*, to establish its position relative to regional rivals. It was not necessarily a strategy to achieve success in a specific bilateral rivalry, but it does represent an important example of a great power using a strategy of systemic hegemony to crowd out the influence of potential rivals. The tribute system remains especially relevant because of the suggestions that the modern-day PRC may use a similar approach to gain advantage in its rivalry with the United States.

Western theories about international relations frequently presume a model of great power behavior, primacy, and dominance that is derived from European and U.S. history. Could the experiences of great powers in other parts of the world offer a different model of success in great power rivalries, particularly in the terms used in this study (achieving success through shaping the international system)? Preindustrial China over many centuries frequently exercised a form of hegemony in East Asia that is sometimes labeled a *tribute system*. Although the degree of actual influence over other polities along its periphery varied considerably over time, the core of this purported Chinese form of hegemony consisted of a loose suzerainty exercised through a series of reciprocating actions and gift-giving mediated through rituals. This approach represents one historical strategy for success in systemic terms. Might China aspire to return to such a mode of international leadership in Asia, and perhaps even beyond?

The discussion in this appendix argues that China's tribute system, along with parallel and complementary forms of influence and statecraft, does offer one potential variety of success in achieving predominant influence over a regional or global system. Although the system might have worked in the past, a restoration is unlikely: Many things stand in the

way of China's use of a similar approach today. However, some ideas that are associated with tributary relations might surface in China's foreign policy, albeit in a heavily attenuated form.

To explore these ideas, the discussion in this appendix will proceed in the following manner. First, the idea of a Chinese tribute system as one strategy for success in shaping an international system to national advantage will be presented and its principal mode of operation described. This approach reflects one possible variety of success for a great power that is seeking dominant influence over a regional or global system. The tribute system embodied a combination of economic, diplomatic, and military measures that drew other actors into a Chinese sphere of influence and established limitations on their independent actions that could threaten Chinese interests. To this degree, the tribute system offers an interesting case of one form of strategy to gain systemic leverage and power.

This is followed by a discussion of the limitations of this framework for understanding China's diplomatic interactions in preindustrial history, noting the diversity of institutions that were used by Chinese authorities to deal with neighboring powers, of which *tributary relations* played, at most, a minor role. Why developments in the modern world have further undermined the logic and rendered the revival of a tributary system unlikely will also be explained. Countries today rely on sources other than China for political legitimacy and economic growth, for example.

Last, there will be an exploration of how, despite the limitations of the idea, some notions that are associated with tributary relations could surface in Chinese foreign policy. In particular, China could be tempted to export its traditional culture and political worldview, especially to neighboring countries, as an ideological basis for extending Beijing's authority in the region. China might also highly esteem symbolic and ritualistic interactions as a way to demonstrate its superiority and to build patron-client ties with poorer countries. China may also step up its nonwar military operations in the region to demonstrate its ability to furnish limited public goods and to further underscore its authority. It is not clear, however, that these partial echoes of the tribute system approach will constitute a viable strategy for shaping the international system in the 21st century.

Background: The Tribute System Paradigm

Scholarly and popular interest in China's historical tribute system stems largely from the concern that a revitalized China could pursue success in systemic terms by seeking to exercise hegemony in a manner that is evocative of past epochs. Martin Jacques summarized the logic of this system when he predicted that China would seek to exercise a Pax Sinica based on the principle that China will accept the political legitimacy of countries that accept its superiority.¹ Some Chinese scholars have proposed the restoration of some form of Sino-

¹ The argument about Pax Sinica is made in Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, Penguin, 2009. For a discussion, see Howard W. French,

centric regional organization. In his 2005 book, *The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution*, scholar Zhao Tingyang contrasted an ideal of a Chinese-led world institution that provided order based on an ethical logic against what he described as a flawed and failing order based on Western concepts. The book has gained considerable attention among the Chinese intelligentsia.² William Callahan surveyed a growing body of literature in which Chinese and Western intellectuals mine Chinese history and philosophy for inspiration on how to formulate a distinctively Chinese approach to international relations informed by such traditions as the tribute system.³

The popular discourse tends to regard the notions of Sino-centrism and the tribute system as interchangeable. However, although they are similar, the concepts are distinctly different. *Sino-centrism* is an ideology that is premised on the notion that China is the cultural, political, and economic center of Asia. As a form of discourse, Sino-centrism has persisted among the country's elites through almost the entire span of Chinese history. Traditionally, Sino-centrism viewed the world as divided between China's superior civilization and barbarism. Some of China's neighbors, such as kingdoms located in modern day Korea and Vietnam, accepted this worldview and sought to imitate aspects of Chinese culture. Others, such as Japan and some nomadic tribes, rejected the worldview.⁴ Even when forced to pay tribute to more powerful kingdoms, Chinese officials communicated among themselves in terms that were consistent with Sino-centrism. They lamented the state of China's weakness and disparaged the "uncivilized" nature of their adversaries.⁵

The notion of a *tribute system*, by contrast, defines a type of international order that is prototypically located in East Asia. The tribute system aspires to describe how China organized Asia's political economy to conform to its vision of Sino-centrism and, by extension, how this strategy represented one variety of defining and pursuing success as measured by predominant influence over the international system. The term itself is a recent Western invention. John Fairbank popularized the concept of the tribute system in his work from the 1940s to the 1960s. The model proposed that China's relations with other states were hierarchical and nonegalitarian, a reflection of Chinese society. The hierarchy was premised on Chinese superiority and suzerainty and on the submission of foreign kingdoms, which were viewed by the

Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power, paperback ed., Vintage, 2017.

² William A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?" *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4, December 2008; Tingyang Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun* [*The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution*], Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005.

³ William A. Callahan, "Sino-Speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 71, No. 1, February 2012.

⁴ Giovanni Andornino, "The Nature and Linkages of China's Tributary System Under the Ming and Qing Dynasties," Working Papers of the Global Economic History Network, London School of Economics, No. 21/06, March 2006.

⁵ Yuan-kang Wang, "Explaining the Tribute System: Power, Confucianism, and War in Medieval East Asia," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, May–August 2013.

Chinese as inferior. Fairbank argued that respect for this hierarchy and acknowledgment of Chinese superiority were absolute requirements for relations with China. The model has become a paradigm for preindustrial Chinese relations with its neighbors. An Oxford encyclopedia entry explains, "In premodern China foreign relations were both hierarchical, with all foreign rulers paying tribute to the Chinese emperor as their superior, and systematic, conducted through a single set of bureaucratic rules and institutions."⁶ Fairbank estimated that at the height of the Ming dynasty, under the Yung-lo Emperor (1403–1425), tributaries included Ryūkyū (Okinawa), Korea, Japan, Annam (Vietnam), Cambodia, Siam (Thailand), Java, Samudra, Calicut, Malacca, Bengal, Ceylon, Brunei, and the Philippines. Via land, Ming annals mentioned 38 tributaries, including Tibet, Turfan (Xinjiang), Rum (Turkey-Persia), and Samarkand (Uzbekistan).⁷

In the tribute system, China's emperor bestowed gifts and titles on neighboring kingdoms, who in turn offered gifts and political submission to the authority of the Chinese emperor. The Chinese emperor provided some measure of security to neighboring kings and controlled the terms of trade. The subject kings were in turn expected to accept the authority of the Chinese emperor in controversial affairs and to carry out his judgments when directed. Foreigners were brought under peaceful control by treating them with honors, allowing them access to goods, and socializing them to a Confucian ideology that promoted a social order based on a sort of cosmic harmony. The tribute system depended on the ideology of Confucianism, China's ability to bestow political legitimacy, the emperor's control of the terms of trade, and the threat of military punishment.⁸ Taken together, the approach aimed to furnish China with the sort of systemic predominance we have defined as success in great power terms.

Confucian ideology. Confucian culture maintained a central role in the tribute system. On the basis of the philosophical precepts of its founder, Confucius (551–479 BCE), the ideology accrued a diverse and sometimes contradictory set of ideas and principles from subsequent generations of scholars and thinkers. Starting in the Han dynasty, emperors frequently backed an official form of Confucian ideology that heavily emphasized notions of obedience to the state. As an instrument of diplomacy, the state-sanctioned Confucian ideology served two interrelated functions: It constituted an ideological glue that facilitated a Chinese-dominated regional political economy, and it fostered consent among lesser polities along the periphery to Chinese dominance in regional affairs. Confucian precepts created a widely shared base of cultural, economic, and political practices that gave people throughout China and neighboring powers elements of a shared identity.⁹

⁶ John E. Wills, Jr., "Tribute System," in Linsun Cheng, ed., *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China: Modern and Historic Views of the World's Newest and Oldest Global Power*, Berkshire Publishing, 2009, pp. 2325–2329.

⁷ J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Têng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, June 1941, p. 155.

⁸ Andornino, 2006.

⁹ Andornino, 2006.

Control of political legitimacy. An important aspect of the tribute system was that compliance by East Asian kings was usually voluntary. Scholars have noted that these kings viewed participation in the rituals surrounding the tribute system as crucial for bolstering their own domestic legitimacy and for gaining an edge against domestic competitors. The Chinese bestowed titles that the kings found politically useful. Moreover, in some cases, the Chinese intervened diplomatically or militarily to bolster the meaning of the titles that were bestowed on the kings. Some East Asian kings also replicated the tribute system in their own domains to exact tribute from lesser tribes and kingdoms.¹⁰

Control of the terms of trade. The tribute system provided a mechanism for Chinese rulers to regulate trade with neighboring countries. Merchants who wanted to trade inside China had to come as part of a diplomatic mission bringing tribute to the emperor. The prices and quantity of goods to be traded were determined by the Chinese rulers. China also maintained monopolies on key goods, such as tea, to further policy goals. Some analysts argued that imperial control of prices was critical to the success of the tribute system and that the spread of free markets—notably by Western powers—helped undermine the system.¹¹

Control of external military threats. The tribute system required the Chinese military to occasionally take military action to bolster the emperor's credibility. For example, Ming dynasty political influence was grounded in military achievements, such as the destruction of the former Mongol Yuan rulers, campaigns against Vietnam, Zheng He's maritime voyages, and the defense of Korea from a Japanese invasion. Occasionally, the Chinese emperor might direct limited military expeditions to punish neighboring countries that defied his orders or to back local kings against domestic rivals.¹²

In short, the success of China's tribute system depended on several features of preindustrial Asia. It required widespread acceptance of a Confucian ideology, a dependence on China for sources of political legitimacy among lesser polities, Chinese dominance of the regional terms of trade, and a willingness to carry out occasional military interventions to uphold the emperor's credibility. The combined effect of these components, at least in the widely discussed image of the tribute system in the West, was to secure for China a lasting degree of predominant influence in the Asia-Pacific regional system of the time.

Limitations of the Tribute System as a Paradigm

The relative success of the tribute system as a variety of great power success should not be overstated, however. As will be explained in the following section, the tribute system was just one of many institutions China used to manage relations. China's use of the tribute system

¹⁰ Wang, 2013.

¹¹ Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan, "The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 2012.

¹² Andornino, 2006.

varied over time and by geographic region. Moreover, the tribute system's foundation in Chinese domestic political concerns severely limited its appeal. Scholars have also noted that the focus on China's perspective can exaggerate how effectively the system worked. The broader set of tools and strategies that China adopted, taken together with aspects of the tribute system, perhaps offer a more compelling portrait of a strategy to achieve dominant systemic influence.

Other institutions for managing foreign relations. China historically employed several methods alongside the tribute system to regulate foreign relations. For example, officials frequently relied on bribery, blackmail, war, alliances, balance of power politics, and trade. Variation, not consistency, in Chinese interactions with neighboring powers was the norm. This was especially the case when China was coping with formidable powers that proved to be equal or superior to China. In such cases, war, blackmail, power politics, and alliance-building activities were more consistently employed than tributary rituals.¹³ Awareness of the diverse methods employed by Chinese authorities to manage relations undermines the tribute system as an exclusive paradigm for Chinese suzerainty. Instead, China's tribute system could be better understood as an approach that narrowly applied to situations in which China had clear superiority over weak neighbors. Moreover, an appreciation of the diverse methods that were used by China to manage relations with neighboring powers dispels the notion that the country operated in a unique manner compared with other great powers.

Variation over time and by region. China's ability to exact tribute varied over time and by region. The tribute system and the influence of Sino-centrism arguably reached its acme in the Ming dynasty, and, even then, it applied most concretely to specific geographic regions, such as the Korean peninsula and area of Vietnam. Not all countries submitted to the emperor's authority. The Ming did not succeed in exacting tribute from Japan, for example.¹⁴ Other than the Ming dynasty, the tribute system operated to varying degrees over time and geographic areas. In periods of dynastic decline, which occurred frequently over China's history, tributes may have barely functioned. In some cases, such as the latter Sung dynasty, Chinese rulers who oversaw a weakened state paid tribute to more powerful tribes. The Chinese also recognized the limits of their rule. The claim to rule "all under heaven" did not imply an intent to rule the entire world.¹⁵ It referred principally to China's periphery—basically north and southeast Asia and parts of central Asia. The Chinese regarded powerful barbarian tribes, especially from the northwest, as equals and did not expect to extend authority over them. Examples include various Turkic, Uighur, and Tibetan states in the Sui and Tang dynasties, with whom China's emperor frequently claimed to maintain "brotherly" relations.¹⁶

¹³ Zhang and Buzan, 2012.

¹⁴ Zhang Feng, "Rethinking the 'Tribute System': Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Winter 2009, p. 556.

¹⁵ Zhang, 2009, p. 571.

¹⁶ Zhang, 2009, p. 555.

Ethnocentrism of tribute system. Scholars have pointed out how the tribute system reflected the limits and conditions of China's political economy. The imperial system had few resources relative to the burden of its rule. Such resources were perennially scarce because the rate of land tax in China was extremely low, at around 10 percent, compared with the 30–50 percent rate that was typical of European states and Japan. The low tax rate reflected a domestic political logic designed to ensure social stability. The empire's delicate unity was heavily reliant on social consent on the basis of the conscious indoctrination of Chinese peasants. The tribute system extended a fundamentally domestic relationship to peoples accustomed to different social structures, but the ethnocentric nature of the system limited its ability to incorporate peoples beyond the periphery. The inability of the ethnocentric tribute system to incorporate powerful, competing civilizations contributed to its collapse. In particular, the ideology of Sino-centrism and the tribute system collapsed when China was overwhelmed by technically and culturally more-advanced Western powers. The Western powers posed a competing model of civilization that the Chinese system could not absorb.¹⁷

Limited socialization of others. Focusing on China's perspective of the tribute system can also exaggerate its effect. Scholarship that has looked at the system from the point of view of tributaries has shown that only a few countries fully accepted a Sinicized culture and worldview. Many feigned compliance to gain desired benefits. One study concluded that Chinese cultural pretensions failed to socialize the Indianized states of Southeast Asia apart from Vietnam. The economic order created by the system was also closed and unavailable for some Southeast Asian countries, which undermined their incentive to adopt a Chinese worldview. In fact, the region frequently resisted Chinese authority, leading the emperor to order a few coercive campaigns to assert his authority. Ironically, such expeditions often resulted in consequences that were detrimental to China's interests.¹⁸

In sum, the tribute system as a model of national success for China in preindustrial history has severe limitations. The concept, invented by Western scholars, claimed that China operated in a unique manner as a great power. Yet more recent scholarship has rejected this notion. In reality, imperial China used diverse methods to manage its relationships with its neighbors and to shape the surrounding international system, including the same practices used by European counterparts, such as bribery, blackmail, alliance-building, and war. The tribute system operated intermittently throughout China's history, reaching its acme during the Ming dynasty but functioning far more weakly in other periods. The system also applied principally to specific geographic regions that featured populations that were socialized into Chinese culture, such as the Korean peninsula and Vietnam. It is thus inaccurate to depict the tribute system as a paradigm of great power success in achieving systemic influence because it only applied to one part of preindustrial China's diplomatic history.

¹⁷ Andornino, 2006.

¹⁸ Min Shu, "Hegemon and Instability: Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia Under the Tribute System," Global Institute for Asian Regional Integration, Waseda University, Bulletin No. 4, 2011.

Modern Era Constraints to a Tribute System Revival

Even when the limitations of the tribute system in China's preindustrial history are accepted, could it apply as an archetype for Chinese primacy in coming years? Could the system—combined with the other tools outlined above—offer a renewed variety of success? Distinctive features of the contemporary international situation make the revival of the tribute system unlikely. Different from the past, China today faces an international situation in which Sino-centrism lacks appeal. It also faces the prevalence of nationalist ideologies, an institutionalized and multilateral order, a globalized economy, and the Chinese government's own foreign policy precepts. Each of these features undermines key elements of Sino-centrism or the tribute system.

Lack of support for Sino-centrism. The success and appeal of the tribute system rested in large part on the Sino-centric notion that China served as the center of human culture and civilization. In past centuries, weaker neighbors acknowledged China's cultural superiority and sought to partake in its civilization. Some polities, primarily in the Korean and Vietnamese border areas, demonstrated their acceptance of this ideology by imitating Chinese culture and civilization.

However, today, China faces a complex international society that features many powerful rival civilizations, including those of Japan, the United States, India, and Europe. Even imperial China's previous clients in Korea and Vietnam have developed unique cultures, languages, and identities. Virtually no country views China as the center of civilization. Thus, the ideological underpinnings of the traditional tribute system simply do not exist. Countries that accept Chinese patronage, such as perhaps Cambodia, appear to be motivated more out of a desire for largesse and economic benefits than out of any identification with China's culture and worldview.¹⁹

Prevalence of nationalist ideologies. In preindustrial Asia, China's neighbors included a diverse mix of multiethnic empires—especially in the northern and western regions—nomadic tribes, and minor kingdoms. Some had their own cultures or shared an identity from rival civilizations, such as India. But the sophistication and appeal of China's culture and civilization proved a vital ideological resource that underpinned the tribute system. Countries willingly participated in the tribute system in part because they recognized China's civilization as superior.

Modern nationalism has discredited the supposed superiority of Chinese civilization. Countries throughout the world have adopted nationalist ideologies to bolster the political legitimacy of their governments and to encourage social cohesion. In Asia, countries, including such traditional clients as North Korea, South Korea, and Vietnam, maintain indigenous nationalist ideologies and reject any notion of Chinese superiority. Relatedly, China's official ideology rejects the universalism of classical Confucian thought, both in the leadership's

¹⁹ Sovinda Po and Lucy West, "Cambodian Foreign Policy in 2020: Chinese Friends and American Foes?" *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2021.

adherence to a Western ideology of Marxism and in its insistence that the country's socialist ideology only applies to China.²⁰

Modern sources of political legitimacy. An acceptance of China's superiority gave it the power to confer legitimacy on rulers of minor polities along its periphery. This proved to be an important resource for China to manage relations with at least some of its neighbors. In return, China's emperor derived prestige from the spectacle of submissive kingdoms and polities that participated in rituals designed to reaffirm China's supremacy.

Today, however, states gain their legitimacy not from China but from an international system ultimately based on ideals from Europe and the United States. The Westphalian ideal of equal states contradicts the classical Chinese ideology that envisioned a hierarchical order based on the division between Chinese civilization and barbarian "others." Countries instead derive legitimacy from the theoretical consent of their respective populations and from acceptance by their peer states in the international order. This removes the desire for political legitimacy as a potential incentive for countries to participate in a Chinese tribute system.

Institutionalized and multilateral international order. In preindustrial Asia, an international order did not exist. Polities interacted with each other through weakly institutionalized manners. The tribute system provided a more ordered and more structured way for China to interact with at least some of its neighbors. Smaller kingdoms and polities along China's periphery participated in these ritualistic interactions as a way to secure benefits in a more stable, predictable manner.

Today, however, most countries participate in the creation and maintenance of an array of international laws, rules, and norms. The international order also features a variety of overlapping global and regional multilateral government-to-government and nongovernmental organizations. China participates in many of these institutions, including the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Regional Defense Forum, the United Nations, the Group of 20, and others. These institutions reaffirm the principle of equality between states and the right of states to manage their relations directly with one another, which contradicts the ideal of a natural hierarchy based on Chinese superiority.

Globalized economy. The imperial Chinese government's ability to control the terms of trade provided a critical source of leverage in the country's ability to gain the compliance of other kingdoms. This was owed in part to the weak links that many Asian polities had with the rest of the world. China was a dominant trading partner for many countries along its periphery. For many centuries, China was also the most wealthy and prosperous state in the world and thus a lucrative trade partner. Trade with European, African, or American states counted for far less, by contrast.

Today, however, a global economy offers all countries the opportunity to trade with other wealthy economies. China is an attractive market, but not the only one. Moreover, China's

²⁰ Bo Xiang, ed., "Backgrounder: Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," Xinhua, March 17, 2018.

government has only a limited ability to wield trade as a tool of coercion because of the variety and number of economic actors that can travel and relocate, as well as China's dependence on the global economy.

China's foreign policy precepts. In preindustrial China, the imperial administration conducted tribute relations as part of a series of rituals to bolster the government's legitimacy. For many centuries, the Ministry of Rituals carried out foreign policy work on behalf of the emperor.²¹ Moreover, the Confucian ideology that underpinned tributary relations was derived from the imperial state's promotion of the same ideology to enhance the legitimacy of its position relative to the domestic populace. The tribute system thus shared considerable continuity with domestic policy.

By contrast, China's foreign policy precepts today pose another serious obstacle to any revival of a traditional tribute system. In its foreign policy, China's leadership upholds a strong adherence to the Westphalian principle of sovereignty and equality between states. Chinese leaders routinely promote the idea of a *democracy* and *equality* in international relations and criticize *hegemony* as a principle. China's insistence on the principle of noninterference and the peaceful resolution of disputes contradicts the practices of past emperors who interfered in the domestic politics of the country's neighbors to ensure the loyalty and fealty of those kings. All of these principles and ideals undermine the notion of formal Sino-centrism and a natural hierarchy based on Chinese cultural superiority.

In sum, China is unlikely to revive a form of tributary relations as a strategy to achieve dominant systemic influence in the Indo-Pacific or beyond for many practical and ideological reasons. In practical terms, China lacks the ideological basis of the preindustrial practice because Sino-centrism lacks appeal in Asia. Many modern states hold nationalistic ideals and a sense of identity that are distinctly different from and, in some cases, in opposition to those of China. Moreover, Beijing lacks the leverage the country held in the preindustrial age to incentivize compliance. Many modern states owe their existence to Western ideals and practices. Neither does China have the economic dominance that it once did. Countries rely on the United States and other major players in the global economy as much as they rely on China. And China's foreign policy precepts prohibit military interventions in the affairs of others, a form of muscle flexing that in the preindustrial age may have impressed some international audiences.

Potential Reemergence of Tribute-Inspired Ideas

Although far from determined, the possibility of China ascending to a position of primacy in East Asia cannot be discounted. Should it achieve such a position, might it draw from its past experiences to exercise international leadership? A complete restoration of the tribute system is unlikely, and it seems doubtful that a Sino-centric ideology will resonate much beyond

²¹ Jo-Anne Pemberton, *Sovereignty: Interpretations*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, pp. 96–99.

China's borders. However, some ideas from the preindustrial age could inform Beijing's approach to managing relations with its neighbors and comprise at least some elements of a revised and updated strategy for systemic predominance.

Just as the tribute system in previous ages reflected the agricultural, premodern political economy, any new era of Chinese hegemony would similarly need to account for the reality of advanced industrial economies and the globalized nature of trade and investment. In the face of a more open, porous international system in which China might someday have preponderant influence—but not a near monopoly—in ideology, security, and economic affairs, China would likely have to rely more on incentives and disincentives to manipulate states into behaving in a compliant manner. Beijing does not need to demand that foreign leaders believe in China's inherent superiority to achieve its policy goals. Beijing only needs leaders to take actions and defer others in accordance with China's interests. China can achieve this with such tools as the various mechanisms to regulate the flow of trade and investment, diplomatic pressure by officials, and messages delivered through mass media. Chinese leaders seem to have arrived at similar conclusions based on President Xi Jinping's directives to rely on "bottom line principles" to warn antagonists and on policies that shower "benefits" to supporters as a way to shape the behavior of other countries.²² Such a mode of operation would not really be uniquely tributary but rather more of the type of patron-client relationship that most great powers cultivate.

However, some evocation of the tributary system could surface in the emphasis that is placed on ritual and ceremony that accompanies diplomatic activities, which could bolster the legitimacy of client states and enhance the status of Chinese leaders. The enormous attention placed by Chinese diplomats on matters of "face" and on treating leaders from developing countries with fanfare could perhaps be viewed as a legacy of the value of political legitimacy that is placed on interactions between China and other, especially smaller, polities.²³

Similarly, Chinese leaders might disavow any aspiration to spread a Sino-centric ideology. However, they do aim to dominate discourse with ideas, values, and terms that are linked to Chinese traditional and Marxist thought.²⁴ The spread of Chinese discourse would serve a similar purpose to Confucianism in preindustrial China of providing an ideological underpinning to serve as a "glue" for a political economy led by China. In the contemporary world, the regional political economy of most interest to China consists of the large number of countries that are associated with the Belt and Road Initiative.

But these features would only vaguely evoke China's past tributary system, and they would likely be exceeded in importance by the modern features of Chinese foreign policy.

²² "Xi Jinping Delivered an Important Speech at the Symposium on Peripheral Diplomacy" ["习近平在周边外交工作座谈会上发表重要讲话"], Xinhua [新华社], October 25, 2013.

²³ Jane Perlez, "Where China Is Changing Its Diplomatic Ways (at Least a Little)," *New York Times*, July 25, 2022.

²⁴ Kenton Thibaut, *Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions and Reality in the Digital Domain*, Atlantic Council, August 2022.

Chinese leaders emphasize, for example, the importance of renovating and leading various multilateral institutions and venues that organize international activity. The government upholds existing multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, even as Beijing has stepped up efforts to shape rules and norms within those institutions.²⁵ China's leadership also formally upholds the equality of nations and seeks to exert leadership informally rather than insist on a reconfiguration of international society that is premised on formal Chinese superiority. Indeed, past gaffes in which Chinese officials belittled neighbors underscore the perils of asserting Chinese superiority.²⁶ Beijing also seeks to master the array of international laws, rules, and norms rather than overthrow them in favor of Sino-centric rule. Leadership in the integration of infrastructure construction throughout Europe and Asia, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, features Chinese involvement in the economic well-being of other countries to a much higher degree than was the case in the preindustrial era.

China could also seek to bolster its international influence with the deployment of military power for mainly nonwar missions. These deployments would aim primarily to protect Chinese interests but could also tackle nonstate threats that endanger public goods, such as international shipping lanes. Chinese military deployments since the end of the Cold War have consisted of such nonwar missions, among which the most prominent could well be the persistent deployment of warships to counter piracy and to protect shipping lanes near the Gulf of Aden.²⁷ Chinese military and coast guard forces could also try to bolster regional security in the Asia-Pacific region. However, in contrast with the preindustrial age, China's government has expressed a preference for multilateral collaboration on shared security concerns.

In sum, China's growing power raises the possibility that some day it will attain a position of prominence in the Asia-Pacific, and some observers have referred to a modern-day tribute system as one strategy for achieving such systemic predominance. However, key features in the political economy of the contemporary world render the revival of a tribute system, one that underpinned Chinese hegemony in East Asia on a tenuous and limited basis through the history of imperial China, unlikely. Above all, China's lack of control over the sources of legitimacy, trade, and security for neighboring powers undermines the possibility of voluntary submission to Chinese authority and the acceptance of the Chinese notions of superiority that underpinned the traditional tribute system.

The change in conditions may have rendered the revival of the tribute system impossible, but it has also raised new opportunities for China to exercise a form of regional leadership. By employing the modern systems of multilateral frameworks, globalized economic produc-

²⁵ Timothy Heath, "China Intensifies Effort to Establish Leading Role in Asia, Dislodge U.S.," *China Brief*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Jamestown Foundation, February 6, 2017.

²⁶ Ian Storey, "China's Missteps in Southeast Asia: Less Charm, More Offensive," *China Brief*, Vol. 10, No. 25, Jamestown Foundation, December 17, 2010.

²⁷ Timothy R. Heath, Christian Curriden, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *China's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, RAND Corporation, RR-A444-4, 2021.

tion, large-scale geo-economic infrastructure projects, mass media, the projection of military force, and other tools of contemporary statecraft, Beijing could hope to serve as a leader of the Asia-Pacific. Such a hegemony would bear so little resemblance to the past tribute system that even the label of neo-tributary system would not make sense. Some other label that more accurately reflects the modern nature of China's situation would be more appropriate.

Case Study: Japan's Effort to Succeed Through a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

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Case Study Summary

This case study outlines a strategy of pre-WWII Japan for gaining advantage in international rivalries: the projected East Asian network of military, economic, and political control that would provide it with critical materiel power and more general influence. This was never fully realized, but it did reflect Japan's views of the long-term rivalry and one potential approach to gaining relative advantage.

Days before his cabinet took office in July 1940, incoming Japanese Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro articulated his vision for Japan's foreign policy:

In the realm of foreign policy, [Japan] must wholeheartedly maintain the Empire's own standpoint and walk the Empire's own path. Walking our own path by no means implies a passive, independent foreign policy. It does not mean simply responding to global changes. Instead, we must be resolved to lead these global changes and to use our power to create the world's new order.¹

The next month, Foreign Minister Yōsuke Matsuoka announced the formation of a new institution that would become the cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy: the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.² The Co-Prosperity Sphere, according to its proponents, was not a traditional empire, but a new form of regional cooperation that was critical to Japan's "self-

¹ Jeremy A. Yellen, *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War*, Cornell University Press, 2019, p. 3.

² Yellen, 2019, pp. 4–5, 36.

existence and self-defense.”³ At its peak, the Co-Prosperity Sphere encompassed most of Southeast Asia, Korea, Formosa, two Japanese puppet regimes in China, and Japan.⁴

The Co-Prosperity Sphere was a product of both idealism and naked self-interest. On the one hand, it offered a vehicle for Japanese policymakers to reshape an international system that many had long considered unjust—a chance to revise the norms and institutions that had structured international affairs since WWI. On the other hand, the Co-Prosperity Sphere functioned as a rhetorical tool that Japanese policymakers could invoke to justify expansionism and colonial exploitation. Although these two portrayals of the Co-Prosperity Sphere are often presented as mutually exclusive, they need not be.⁵ Historian of Japanese imperialism William Beasley writes,

Many Japanese genuinely believed *both* that saving Asia from the West was a crusade *and* that it could only be accomplished by asserting Japanese authority over other Asians. . . . Contradictions of this kind are inherent in the nature of empire.⁶

These contradictions between idealism and self-interest are also ubiquitous in states’ attempts to shape the international system. It would, therefore, be unwise to exclude this case on the basis of the Japanese empire’s hypocrisy, egregious as it was.

Regardless of the Japanese empire’s motives, the Co-Prosperity Sphere was a clear strategic failure. By the time of the Co-Prosperity Sphere’s demise, Japan had neither reshaped the international system nor built a stable colonial empire. The Co-Prosperity Sphere’s failure was, in social science parlance, overdetermined. The concept’s individual failings were each so profound that any one of them could have doomed the entire project on its own. This appendix will focus on two of these failures: (1) the failure of Japanese policymakers to arrive at a coherent vision of how the Co-Prosperity Sphere would reshape the international system and (2) the failure of Japanese policymakers to legitimize the Co-Prosperity Sphere in the eyes of the other major powers and in the Japanese empire’s subjects. But before delving into these failures, this appendix will briefly look at the Co-Prosperity Sphere’s ideological origins.

The Co-Prosperity Sphere’s Ideological Origins

During the 1920s, Japanese policymakers and intellectuals varied in their views of the post-WWI international system. Some, such as future Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro, condemned that system as a veneer for continued Western imperialism—an unjust system that

³ Yellen, 2019, p. 71.

⁴ Formosa refers to modern-day Taiwan; the two puppet regimes in China were the Manchukuo and the Nanjing regimes.

⁵ Yellen, 2019, pp. 9–13.

⁶ W. G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894–1945*, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 243. Emphasis in the original.

divided the world into “haves” and “have-nots.”⁷ Others, although suspicious of the Western powers, saw an opportunity for Japan to achieve its goals by participating in that system. In particular, they believed that by participating in the League of Nations, Japan could become a peer of the Western powers and negotiate its own sphere of influence in Asia.⁸

On the whole, Japanese policymakers and intellectuals grew disillusioned with the post-WWI system over the course of the 1920s and 1930s. This does not mean that internationalist sentiment was totally extinguished. Instead, early proposals for a revised international system argued that a Japan-led regional order could make good on the broken promises of Wilsonian internationalism. Such proposals called for Japan to usher in a new era in which regional cooperation would replace rule by distant, European colonial powers.⁹

Proposals for Japanese leadership in Asia grew more chauvinistic with time. Pan-Asianism, tinged with Japanese exceptionalism, gradually replaced internationalism as an ideological influence on Japanese foreign policy.¹⁰ This process only accelerated as Japan invaded China in 1931, withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933, and invaded China a second time in 1937. This mix of pan-Asianism and Japanese exceptionalism is exemplified in a June 1940 announcement in which Foreign Minister Matsuoka asserted that Asians were linked “historically, racially, and economically” and then declared that Asia’s fate was “a matter of grave concern to Japan in view of her mission and responsibility as the stabilizing force in the region.”¹¹

Incoherence

The most glaring of the Co-Prosperity Sphere’s failures was its incoherence. Japan’s leaders envisioned the Co-Prosperity Sphere as the cornerstone of a new, enduring order for Asia—it was a system-shaping endeavor. But in practice, the Co-Prosperity Sphere was thrown together haphazardly to serve the empire’s short-term needs.

The Co-Prosperity Sphere began as a reaction to two developments that Japanese policymakers believed required an immediate response. The first was Germany’s victories in Europe. The second was the acceleration of a more gradual process: the collapse of the post-WWI international order. Japanese policymakers saw both of these developments as a chance to attain a long-held goal: influence in Southeast Asia, which at the time was made up of British, French, and Dutch colonies. They held this goal for several reasons. On an ideological

⁷ Beasley, 1991, p. 220; Yellen, 2019, pp. 13–14, 86–87.

⁸ Thomas W. Burkman, *Japan and the League of Nations: Empire and World Order, 1914–1938*, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008, pp. xi–xiv, 210–213.

⁹ Jessamyn R. Abel, *The International Minimum: Creativity and Contradiction in Japan’s Global Engagement, 1933–1964*, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015, pp. 178–179, 181, 183.

¹⁰ Abel, 2015, p. 177.

¹¹ Beasley, 1991, p. 226.

level, Japanese policymakers believed that Japan, as the preeminent Asian nation, was the natural and rightful guarantor of stability in Asia. On a practical level, they believed that the region's resources could sustain the empire's war effort in China.¹²

Although some Japanese policymakers welcomed Germany's weakening of the British, French, and Dutch empires, many feared that Germany would take the Southeast Asian colonies of its hobbled rivals if Japan did not seize the moment and do so first.¹³ The weakening of the post-WWI order only strengthened Japanese policymakers' sense of urgency. Japan's foreign policy leaders believed that the world was fracturing into blocs led by major powers. Their goal, therefore, was to stake out Japan's sphere and to convince the other major powers to respect it.¹⁴ Japan's leaders believed that they were living through an *ordering moment* and that if they acted quickly, they could reshape an international system that had denied Japan its proper place as leader of Asia.

This speed came at a price. Few had any idea what the Co-Prosperity Sphere would entail when it was announced on August 1, 1940. Even its chief proponent, Foreign Minister Matsuoka, had little in the way of concrete plans. Efforts to make the Co-Prosperity Sphere into something concrete only began after Japan had begun conquering vast swaths of Asia.¹⁵

In principle, Japanese policymakers could have recovered from their failure to plan by converging on a plan. However, Japanese elites were unable to agree on a shared vision for the Co-Prosperity Sphere beyond the basic idea that the Sphere would feature a hierarchical political and economic order with Japan at its center.¹⁶

This was not for a lack of trying. In February 1942, Tokyo convened the Greater East Asia Construction Council to chart Asia's future. But the Construction Council's government- and private-sector participants failed to agree on who should oversee regional planning and on where to locate major industries. The Construction Council's Fundamental Policy plan did not resolve these competing and mutually exclusive visions for the Co-Prosperity Sphere. The Fundamental Policy was approved by the Tōjō cabinet but was never implemented.¹⁷ Tokyo's next effort to impose order on the Co-Prosperity Sphere was in September 1942 in the form of the Greater East Asia Ministry, which was given jurisdiction over most of Greater East Asia.¹⁸ However, the Greater East Asia Ministry was hobbled by disagreements between the military and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the end, the ministry mainly conducted

¹² Beasley, 1991, pp. 220–225; Yellen, 2019, pp. 30–31.

¹³ Yellen, 2019, p. 27.

¹⁴ Yellen, 2019, pp. 46–48.

¹⁵ Beasley, 1991, p. 233; Yellen, 2019, pp. 76–77.

¹⁶ Yellen, 2019, pp. 87–88.

¹⁷ Yellen, 2019, pp. 89–93.

¹⁸ Except for the inner territories of Korea, Formosa (Taiwan), and Karafuto (Sakhalin).

cultural activities.¹⁹ Thanks to this failure to create consensus, what began as a self-conscious act of system-shaping ended up as a chaotic amalgam of issue-specific policies.

Illegitimacy

A more subtle reason the Co-Prosperity Sphere failed was that Japan struggled to convince the world that its primacy in Asia was legitimate. Japanese policymakers and intellectuals justified their country's new role by invoking values they believed would resonate with their target audiences. This legitimization strategy can be divided into two very rough eras based on the target audience. From 1940 to 1942, Japan's legitimization strategy focused on the other major powers. From 1943 to 1945, Japan tailored its legitimization narratives to the empire's non-Japanese subjects.

Japan's first task was to convince Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States to respect Japan's preeminence in Asia.²⁰ To make the case for Tokyo's new role, Japanese policymakers articulated a narrative that they believed would appeal to other major powers that possessed colonies of their own. They argued that Japan was uniquely poised to lead Asia because of its wealth, power, and level of civilization.²¹ Japan supported this narrative with concrete actions, such as helping resolve a Thai-French border dispute in Indochina. But Japan struggled to convince the other major powers that Japanese leadership was appropriate for Asia. On the one hand, Japan's alliance with Germany assuaged Tokyo's fears that Berlin would seize its rivals' colonies in Southeast Asia. But on the other hand, Japan struggled to win over the Soviet Union and the United States and declared war on the latter in December 1941.

By late 1942, Japan's war effort was faltering. To compensate for a string of military defeats, Tokyo attempted to shore up support in its colonies by refocusing the Co-Prosperity Sphere's legitimization narratives on the non-Japanese who now lived in the Sphere.²²

This was not Japan's first attempt to garner support among the Sphere's non-Japanese inhabitants. These early appeals were often grounded in pan-Asianism. But these appeals were, ironically, too particular to Japan to export to Southeast Asia: The concept of "Asians" as a singular people was not always shared by those living in the Sphere. This was especially the case in Southeast Asia, where Japan could not invoke a shared Confucian heritage.²³

¹⁹ Yellen, 2019, pp. 89–93.

²⁰ Yellen, 2019, pp. 47–48.

²¹ Yellen, 2019, pp. 83–87.

²² The idea that Japan cared what its new subjects thought strains credulity considering the many atrocities the military inflicted on Koreans, Chinese, and others across the empire. Nevertheless, influential policymakers in Tokyo believed that they had to win over the Co-Prosperity Sphere's non-Japanese subjects, especially the leaders of up-and-coming nationalist movements (Yellen, 2019, pp. 140–142).

²³ Beasley, 1991, pp. 243–244, 256.

Although it was not abandoning pan-Asianism, Tokyo reintroduced some of the liberal internationalist rhetoric that had been used to justify Japanese primacy in the 1930s. Modest policy changes underpinned these new narratives: Japan granted Burma and the Philippines nominal independence and gave greater autonomy to the pro-Japan collaborationist regime in Nanjing.²⁴ But the meat of Japan's new narrative was rhetorical: Japanese policymakers traveled across the Co-Prosperity Sphere to win hearts and minds, and Tokyo hosted the highly choreographed Greater East Asia Conference in 1943.²⁵ At the end of the conference, the representatives unanimously approved the Greater East Asia Joint Declaration—a statement of principles underlying the Co-Prosperity Sphere.²⁶ The final product bore many similarities to the Atlantic Charter, which was not lost on the declaration's proponents or critics. However, the reception was mixed. Although some representatives spoke highly of the Co-Prosperity Sphere, others offered only cautious support, focusing their praise on how the Sphere would grant national autonomy.²⁷

Ultimately, Japan's use of liberal internationalist rhetoric put it in an uncomfortable position whenever the Co-Prosperity Sphere was criticized in terms of that ideology. Either Japan could give the colonies what they wanted and erode the empire's control, or it could stand firm and erode any goodwill it had won from the empire's subjects. And Japan could not afford to be hypocritical.

²⁴ Yellen, 2019, pp. 146–148.

²⁵ Abel, 2015, p. 177.

²⁶ Yellen, 2019, p. 157.

²⁷ Yellen, 2019, pp. 150–152.

Case Study: Prussia's Drive for Success by Shaping the European System

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Case Study Summary

This case study describes Prussia's search for advantage relative to other great powers in the European system and its use of one specific tactic: creating narratives of legitimacy that shaped how others treated its power. This was a critical strategy that empowered Prussia's rise in relation to other great powers and set the stage for some degree of success in its historical rivalries.

From 1863 to 1871, over the course of three wars—the Dano-Prussian war of 1864, the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1871—Prussia systemically defeated its opponents and consolidated its position as the head of a unified, nationalist Germany. As Prussia expanded, the European powers accommodated Prussia's ambitious aims. Rather than forming a coalition to contain Prussian power, the great powers chose either to sit on the sidelines or to aid Prussia's expanse into new territory. In doing so, the European powers facilitated the growth of Prussian power, German unification, and the transformation of European politics.

At first glance, it may seem unclear why the Prussian case warrants contemporary analysis or how it would provide lessons about success in international rivalries. Prussia strove for goals within the competitive European international system that are similar to goals that might be set today, including security from conquest, economic prosperity, and—perhaps most notably—national unity (German unification in the 1860s was not yet a given and even, perhaps, an improbable outcome). But beyond this, Prussia's situation in the late 19th century seems entirely different from the situation of the United States in the early 20th. Prussia was not a declining hegemon but a potential rising power, and a relatively weak one at that. Certainly, it was not in the position to act as a “rule maker” in European politics. The system in which Prussia was embedded, moreover, bore little resemblance to today's rules-based order;

it was a competitive system of multiple, European great powers that were largely illiberal imperial states, not liberal democracies.

Despite these notable differences, Prussia's position within the system and its strategy in managing rivalries offer important insights on how to manage an international system during a time of significant transition. Although not a rules-based order in the sense of contemporary global politics, Prussia was attempting to secure its interests during the waning days of the Concert of Europe. What Prussia faced in the pursuit of its goals was a system of multiple rivalries and an environment of normative pluralism. During the height of the Concert period, security rivalries and normative tensions were managed through the Concert system, within which the great powers saw it as an obligation to pursue negotiated settlements. As Concert institutions declined, competition grew particularly contentious because the remaining imperial monarchies—Austria, Prussia, and Russia—faced not only relatively liberal democratic states (the United Kingdom) but also increasingly nationalist movements in Italy and a nationalist autocrat (Napoleon III) in France.

To make matters even more complicated, Prussia faced the challenge of securing its goals without provoking two disastrous outcomes. First, there was the possibility of a broad European coalition that could check Prussia's aims. Prussian leaders worried about a coalition between France and Russia (given the alliance before WWI, their concerns were well founded). Austria, too, could emerge as a permanent enemy, especially after its loss to Prussia in 1866. While the United Kingdom seemed unlikely to join a formal alliance with any European power, it was willing to mobilize its power in coalition with others if Prussia seemed overly expansive, as it had done after the revolutions of 1848. Second, Prussia worried that its actions could inadvertently empower its main rival, Napoleon III's France. Napoleon III had been looking to expand France's influence in Europe by backing Italian nationalists against the Austrians, strengthening ties with nationalists in the German confederation, and expanding imperial claims abroad.

In the end, Prussia (and then Germany) was inordinately successful. Over a period of two decades, Prussia managed to secure the "narrow" goals outlined in the introduction of this appendix, as well as two broader ones: ensuring a fairly prestigious position within the international system and, perhaps even more importantly, preventing its rival France from increasing its influence in European politics. To do this, Prussia relied not on the strategies of mobilization but of demobilization. We often think of great power success in rivalries as stemming from the ability of states to mobilize support for their interests through the use of military, economic, or ideational instruments. In this case, what Prussia managed to do was demobilize possible opposition to its rising power.

Although Prussia relied on several demobilization strategies, key among them was the use of *legitimation strategies*. Prussia's leaders proved effective at appealing to rules and norms, convincing other powers that they were acting within—and not against—the existing European order and that, if anything, the real threat came from more revolutionary actors, such as France. In essence, Prussia used the existing normative system to shape the formation of coalitions in its favor. The next section outlines the importance of demobili-

zation strategies in international politics, especially in systems with multiple great powers. I then turn to a specific discussion of the role of legitimization strategies in demobilization, looking specifically at Prussia's efforts at the start of German unification—during what is known as the Schleswig-Holstein crisis—to see how Prussia appealed to European norms to defuse resistance to Prussia's rise.

Multipolar Systems and the Importance of Demobilization

We are accustomed to thinking about great power success in terms of ability to mobilize power. When we analyze a country's ability to engage in power politics, we often ask whether leaders can effectively muster enough resources to engage in power-political competition. Can leaders, for example, effectively call up military forces, orient economic resources to counter an opponent, and draw together domestic factions in pursuit of a cohesive national interest? Abroad, we look to whether states have alliances with other powers, whether they can leverage economic relationships, or whether they can mobilize partners around a shared identity (e.g., liberal democracies) to bind a coalition.

Equally important to successful power-political competition are strategies of *demobilization*. A country deploys strategies that are designed to break apart balancing efforts, either at home or abroad. Russian disinformation aimed at disaffected groups in the United States is a domestic demobilization strategy. States can also use various forms of *wedging* to drive apart potential coalitions.¹ This approach is likely to be particularly critical in international systems, in which multiple powers are competing for influence. In these systems, coalitions are often fluid, and thus a country can find opportunities to keep opposing blocs from forming.

This is precisely the system that Prussia/Germany faced from at least 1848 to 1914. The European system was composed of multiple great powers—Austria, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom. From the moment Prussia began to pursue German unification in earnest in 1863, Prussia's leaders recognized that it needed to prevent a bloc from forming among these states if it was going to be successful. This approach to success continued throughout the 19th century. After Prussia took Alsace-Lorraine in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, a partnership between France and Germany was impossible. What Prussia needed to do was make sure France could not draw other partners to its side in pursuit of its own aims.

To do this, Prussia's leaders adopted various strategies. At times, Otto von Bismarck offered material inducements to prevent balancing, even if this meant forgoing spoils. In the 1866 Peace of Prague, which ended the Austro-Prussian War, Bismarck rejected Kaiser Wilhelm I's hopes for a victory parade in Vienna and refused to take any Habsburg territory, aiming to preserve an opportunity for an improved relationship with the Habsburg Mon-

¹ On wedge strategies, see Timothy W. Crawford, *The Power to Divide: Wedge Strategies in Great Power Competition*, Cornell University Press, 2021.

archy.² At the 1878 Congress of Berlin, Germany strengthened its diplomatic relations with Austria and Russia and managed claims to contested territory in the Balkans. In his practice of restraint, Bismarck situated Prussia as a neutral honest broker, eschewing material gains to prevent balancing coalitions.

Prussia did not rely only on material instruments to prevent mobilization. Its leaders also used strategic appeals to international norms—legitimation strategies—to keep coalitions from forming to check its influence. Legitimation strategies involve leaders giving reasons for their actions in reference to existing norms and rules in the international system.³ As states vie for power, they often seek to justify their expansionist policies. Any territorial conquest, economic revision, or demand for a change in political institutions will be accompanied by rhetoric that explains why this change is legitimate. Russia, for example, has appealed to the norms of ethnic rights to justify its invasion of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022. China, likewise, has deployed a mix of historical and legal reasoning to explain its actions in the South and East China seas. The United States maintained that its 2003 invasion of Iraq was necessary in the name of self-defense. In each of these cases, states appealed to publicly accepted norms and rules to justify the coercive practice of power in the international system. We can think of this as a form of soft power but, to be clear, legitimation is not simply about convincing the world that a great power has benign intentions. Legitimation is often as coercive as it is persuasive, denying countries the means to check an opponent's influence in international politics.

The Critical Role of Prussia's Legitimation Strategy in Managing Great Power Competition

Prussia's—and especially Bismarck's—appeals to the rules and norms of the European order created the conditions for its success, staving off counter-coalitions that could have blocked its expansion. For the sake of simplicity, the following sections examine a specific moment of Prussian legitimation: its efforts to undermine a balancing coalition in its first war of expansion into the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein, which were claimed by both the German states and Denmark.⁴ In 1863, a crisis over dynastic succession opened an opportunity for Prussia to invade and annex the territory. As the Schleswig-Holstein crisis unfolded, it seemed likely that Prussia would face an insurmountable balancing coalition. Russia, the United King-

² Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

³ See Jon Elster, "Deliberation and Constitution Making," in Jon Elster, ed., *Deliberative Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 104; Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, Cambridge University Press, 2015; and Arthur A. Stein, "The Justifying State: Why Anarchy Doesn't Mean No Excuses," in John Mueller, ed., *Peace, Prosperity, and Politics*, Routledge, 2000.

⁴ The following sections draw from Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order*, Cornell University Press, 2018.

dom, and France all appeared poised to intervene, either unilaterally or as a coalition, and with force if necessary. All Austria had to do, moreover, was stand aside: Without Austria's assistance, Prussian elites believed that any action against Denmark would fail. If successful action in the duchies was to be possible, Prussia needed to disrupt this collective mobilization and convince each of the great powers that an invasion would be justified.

Prussia's leaders, especially Bismarck, believed that whether these powers would mobilize depended on the *reasons* the German power gave for intervention. As Bismarck explained to his foreign minister, Prussia had at its disposal the "means of securing . . . essential . . . objects and interests" if it used the "justification of our efforts to reach our object."⁵ At the outset of the crisis, there were three ways in which Prussia could have justified its invasion of the duchies. First, it could justify its aggression as a means of upholding existing rules and norms, in particular the 1852 Treaty of London, which had reestablished the status quo in the duchies after the revolutions of 1848. In this framing, it was Denmark that had violated the treaty by attempting to sever Holstein from the German Confederation. Prussia, for its part, was resorting to military force as a means to ensure the status quo: The German powers and Denmark would continue to share sovereignty over the duchies, with Holstein in particular remaining a part of the German Confederation. Second, Prussia could claim that it was acting to secure the dynastic rights of the Duke of Augustenburg in Schleswig-Holstein against an illegitimate Danish king and constitution. Doing so, in practice, would sever the two duchies from Danish rule and undercut the integrity of the Danish monarchy. Finally, Prussia's leaders could embrace the revolutionary rhetoric of German nationalism, arguing that its invasion of the duchies was justified as a measure to protect German minority rights.

Prussia's leaders recognized that only the first of these justifications—appeals to the Treaty of London—would appear legitimate to a European audience. In this framing, Prussia was taking action to uphold, not undermine, the international order. As an editorial in *The Times* stated at the outset of the crisis, if Prussia were to invade the duchies to support the duke, it

would violate a solemn Treaty only eleven years old; it would seek to renew the practice of war from the assertion of dynastic rights, and it would do its best to destroy one of the most respectable and inoffensive States in Europe. By attempting this it is most certain that it would draw down on itself not only odium, but retribution.⁶

Invading Holstein and Schleswig in the name of the treaty, Bismarck realized, was necessary if Prussia wanted to expand without resistance: Only if Prussia appeared to uphold the treaties would Austria, Russia, and the United Kingdom stand down. To trace the content of

⁵ "Bismarck to Bernstorff (Communicated to Earl Russell by Count Bernstorff, October 30), Berlin, October 27, 1862," in Dominic Lieven, Kenneth Bourne, and Donald Cameron Watt, eds., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, Part I, from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the First World War, Series A, Russia, 1859–1914*, University Publications of America, 1983, p. 103.

⁶ *The Times*, November 20, 1863, as quoted in Goddard, 2018.

Prussia's legitimation strategies, I analyzed Prussian justifications as reported by *The Times* during the heart of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis from November 1863 to February 1864.⁷ This qualitative content analysis shows that appeals to international law dominate discussion of the duchies, especially among Prussian officials: More than half of the justifications Prussia offered referenced international law, especially the London Protocol, as the reason for Prussia's invasion.

Reactions of the Great Powers

Throughout the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, Prussia's legitimation strategy had profound effects on collective mobilization. In Austria and Russia, Prussia's rhetoric effectively signaled that it would be bound by international norms and that it would act in the name of a conservative identity, which persuaded those powers to accept its expansion into the duchies. One of the most significant and yet befuddling effects of Bismarck's legitimation strategies was the fact that Austria was persuaded not only to refrain from confrontation but also to assist Prussia's expansion into the duchies. This persuasion was critical to Prussia's success: Without Austria's help, Prussia feared that it would be left alone to face a balancing coalition of France, the United Kingdom, and Russia—a coalition it was far too weak to overcome.

Bismarck's rhetoric never fully convinced Austria that Prussia was committed to upholding the order. Austrian diplomats had no illusions about Bismarck's personal ambitions; they knew the minister president was interested in using the Schleswig-Holstein dispute to revise the status quo in favor of Prussia. But the Prussian leaders' appeals to norms were still effective. Most of the Austrian government believed that as long as Bismarck and Wilhelm spoke *as if* they were interested in the sanctity of treaties, the treaties would constrain Prussia's actions, just as it constrained Austria's.⁸ Strange as it may seem, as Chester Wells Clark argues, "no one" in Austria believed that Prussia would not be trapped by its own rhetoric, that Prussia might "refuse to place her head in the noose."⁹ Thus, as Otto Pflanze argues, the Austrians saw in Bismarck's rhetoric a way to bind Prussia to the European status quo and thus "with each successive step of the dual powers in the Danish affair, Rechberg and his colleagues sought to put the Prussians into this restraining harness" of international norms.¹⁰

⁷ I used the qualitative content analysis program Atlas.ti.

⁸ For example, J. V. Clardy, "Austrian Foreign Policy During the Schleswig-Holstein Crisis of 1864: An Exercise in Reactive Planning and Negative Formulations," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1991; Chester Wells Clark, *Franz Joseph and Bismarck: The Diplomacy of Austria Before the War of 1866*, Harvard University Press, 1934, esp. Chapter 2; and Lawrence D. Steefel, *The Schleswig-Holstein Question*, Harvard University Press, 1932.

⁹ Clark, 1934, p. 60.

¹⁰ Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany: The Period of Unification, 1815–1871*, Princeton University Press, 1963, pp. 241–242.

Prussia's appeals to the rules and norms of the international order also convinced Russia to stand down. To expand, Prussia had to prevent Russia from mobilizing against it in the duchies. In summer 1863, this seemed unlikely; Russia had strong interests in the conflict. In 1848, Russia had shown its commitment to confronting the rise of Prussian power: When faced with Prussia's invasion of the duchies, Russia pronounced that the expansion would "gravely affect the interests of all of the Baltic Powers and tend in its effects to destroy throughout the north the equilibrium established by the treaties. That was an eventuality which Russia could not admit."¹¹ A Russian naval demonstration signaled the state's commitment. Russia's interests from 1863 to 1864 looked very much the same. Strategically, Russia "had no more desire in 1863–1864 than before to see a German fleet in the Baltic based in Kiel nor to see Denmark so weakened by the loss of the duchies that it would join with Sweden-Norway in a Scandinavian union."¹²

Despite Russia's interests, the state chose not to contain or confront Prussia's expansion into the duchies. It was Bismarck's framing of Prussia's expansion as an attempt to uphold the European treaties that ultimately persuaded Russia to demobilize. Bismarck's appeals to European norms signaled restraint to the conservative power. The Russian leaders held no illusions that Bismarck was a "true" conservative, that he was a principled actor who would embrace conservative principles out of sincere belief. But if Prussia would act in the name of dynastic and European principles, this might serve to bind Prussia, not only by strengthening Bismarck's ties with conservative allies but also by severing its ties with nationalist revolutionaries at home and abroad. As W. E. Mosse writes, Russia feared a "revolutionary grouping" between Prussia and proponents of nationalism and was especially worried that any understanding "between Bismarck and Napoleon might destroy Russian influence in Europe."¹³ In the end, the Russian government viewed Prussia's promise to occupy "Schleswig on 'conservative principles,' maintain the treaty of 1852 and preserve the Danish monarchy" as a legitimate aim.¹⁴

Convincing the United Kingdom not to mobilize was Prussia's most difficult task. At the onset of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, the United Kingdom appeared likely to intervene on the side of Denmark and mobilize against Prussia, just as it had done in the first Schleswig-Holstein war in 1848. In 1863, British threats were not simply cheap talk. In late December, Prime Minister Palmerston wrote to former prime minister John Russell that he believed that any German intervention into Schleswig would be unacceptable, arguing that

¹¹ Nesselrode to Meyendorff, April 26, 1848, in Geo. Fred. De Martens, *Recueil des Principaux Traités d'Alliance de Paix, de Trêve, de Neutralité, de Commerce, de Limites, d'Échange, etc.: Conclues par les Puissances de l'Europe, Tant Entre Elles qu'Avec les Puissances et États d'Autres Parties du Monde; 1803–1808*, Vol. 8, Gottingue, 1888, p. 375.

¹² Steefel, 1932, p. 130.

¹³ W. E. Mosse, *European Powers and the German Question, 1848–1871: With Special Reference to England and Russia*, Cambridge University Press, 1958, p. 72.

¹⁴ Mosse, 1958, p. 168. For a discussion, see also Steefel, 1932, p. 200.

“Schleswig is not part of Germany, and its invasion by German troops would be an act of war against Denmark, which would in my clear opinion entitle Denmark to our active military and naval support.”¹⁵

In the United Kingdom, Bismarck’s appeals to norms persuaded some factions to stand down and silenced leaders, such as Palmerston and Russell, who wanted to balance against Prussia. Following Prussian pronouncements, the Earl of Derby argued that there was no reason to mobilize against Prussia in the duchies, noting, “The parties now proceeding against Denmark do not rest their claim on any opposition to the treaty. On the contrary, they proclaim they are proceeding in the spirit of the treaty.”¹⁶ Such papers as *The Times* also changed their opinion. Although *The Times* had once promoted containment, even at the risk of war, it now noted that Prussia’s rhetoric signaled that Prussia was showing “a proper feeling of its responsibility to Europe.”¹⁷ As noted in the paper, “Strange to say, the Prussian ministers who had, it should seem, so obvious an interest in hiding their own delinquencies under the tumult and excitement of a war have shown a respect for Treaties, a good sense, and a moderation that was scarcely to be expected from them.”¹⁸ Confrontation was hardly necessary under these circumstances, and politicians who argued for an aggressive strategy were irresponsible at best.

There were those, most notably Palmerston and Russell, who remained convinced that Prussia was an aggressive state and that Britain should lead a coalition of European states to block its expansion. Throughout the crisis, Russell attempted to organize an alliance against Prussia’s actions to rebuild the coalition that had stymied a similar expansion in 1848. As late as February 1864, Russell had hoped that the Russian and French governments would join Britain in a collective naval demonstration against the Prussian invasion.

These efforts to mobilize support for confrontation fell on deaf ears. Those who wanted to avoid intervention now simply pointed out that Prussia was acting within the boundaries of the treaty Palmerston had promised to protect. Queen Victoria chastised Palmerston and Russell for threatening an “aggressive war on Germany.”¹⁹ The Cabinet refused to support Russell’s attempts to build an alliance against Prussia and refused to sanction a naval demonstration.²⁰

¹⁵ Spencer Walpole, *The Life of Lord John Russell*, reprint ed., Greenwood Press, 1968, p. 388.

¹⁶ *The Times*, February 5, 1864, as quoted in Goddard, 2018.

¹⁷ *The Times*, December 3, 1863, as quoted in Goddard, 2018.

¹⁸ *The Times*, December 4, 1863, as quoted in Goddard, 2018.

¹⁹ George L. Mosse, *The Reformation*, 3rd ed., Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1963, p. 271. Emphasis in original.

²⁰ Palmerston to duke of Somerset (first lord of the admiralty), February 20, 1864, printed in Evelyn Ashley, *The Life of Henry John Temple, Viscount Palmerston 1846–1865: With Selections from His Speeches and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, Richard Bentley & Son, 1876, p. 247.

By February, Palmerston was forced to retract calls for an aggressive policy in a move that Harold Temperley calls Palmerston's greatest diplomatic defeat.²¹ In acquiescing, Palmerston proclaimed that Prussia was acting legitimately and noted that the German powers "are prepared to declare that they abide by the Treaty of 1852, and will maintain the integrity of the Danish monarchy in accordance with the terms of that treaty."²² Bismarck's language did not entirely stem the United Kingdom's efforts to contain Prussia's advances. Among all the European states, UK leaders remained the most suspicious of Bismarck's aims, even as they remained unable to mobilize support for military action. Throughout spring 1864, Russell worked to limit Prussia's expansion diplomatically, forcing the parties to the bargaining table in March 1864. Even then, however, Russell was unable to mobilize a coalition for anything more than mediation. Without a legitimate basis for intervention, the United Kingdom stood aside as Prussia expanded on the continent.

Prussia and the Management of Rivalry

Prussia managed great power competition in ways that both prevented the emergence of rivalries with Austria, Russia, and the United Kingdom and prevented its major rival, France, from gaining influence in 19th century European politics. Germany never became the predominant power in European politics; notably, it did not take the lead in shaping norms within the European system, nor did it make a move toward military or economic hegemony in the mid- or late-19th century. Prussia did not just achieve its narrow goals of preserving its sovereignty and increasing its economic and military power, it also successfully managed German unification and established itself among the more prestigious powers of European politics, in particular acting as a broker in European competition.

What is notable, I have argued here, is that Prussia accomplished this through strategies of demobilization and, in particular, appeals to status quo norms to convince rivals that its aims were limited. It is worth considering alternative histories to understand why this is significant. Bismarck, for example, could have forcefully played the nationalist card in Prussia's bid for German unification. Doing so would have more-quickly and more-effectively mobilized support for unification among the liberal-nationalists in German Confederation states. But doing so would have also undercut Prussia's larger aims. Appealing to nationalism would have brought Russia and Austria into opposition and laid the groundwork for a major rivalry between nationalist and conservative powers. It would have also empowered Napoleon III, who had already positioned himself as a revolutionary nationalist.

A commitment to playing within status quo rules instead allowed Prussia to stabilize its position in a competitive European system. It convinced other European powers that Prussia

²¹ Harold W. V. Temperley and Lillian M. Penson, eds., *Foundations of British Foreign Policy: From Pitt (1792) to Salisbury (1902)*, Routledge, 1966, p. 248.

²² *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, Vol. CLXXII, Cornelius Buck, 1863, Cols. 107, 111.

was not a threat to existing norms and cast its rival as the major threat. It was not a revolutionary grand strategy but one that demonstrates the value of norm-consistent legitimation in international politics. Prussia's success demonstrates the paradoxical power of playing by the rules in international politics.

Case Study: Shaping the System at Moment of Victory

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Case Study Summary

This case study focuses on one way a great power sought to shape the international system for relative advantage in the context of historical rivalries. The study covers U.S. efforts in the wake of the Cold War to shape European futures, both in redrawing political boundaries after the Soviet collapse and in circumscribing the role of the European Union (EU) as a potential rival for influence. These actions were not targeted at a specific rival but do reflect system-shaping approaches great powers have repeatedly used in such rivalries.

The United States' Sources of Post–Cold War Dominance

What explains the ability of the United States to influence the international system during and immediately after the end of the Cold War, and what lessons does this hold for success in great power politics today? This question is of more than historical interest. Policymakers in Washington and beyond argue that the post–Cold War era is over and a new era of great power competition has arrived, but the decisions and systems put place in the late 1980s and early 1990s continue to define key elements of international security and U.S. foreign policy.¹ Unpacking how U.S. leaders looked to structure international processes in the post–Cold War era thus promises to illuminate core features of contemporary world politics while offering lessons—positive and negative—for the road ahead.

¹ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *National Security Strategy*, White House, October 2022; Elbridge A. Colby and A. Wess Mitchell, “The Age of Great-Power Competition: How the Trump Administration Refashioned American Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 1, January–February 2020; Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “The Day After Trump: American Strategy for a New International Order,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Spring 2018; Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, White House, December 2017.

It is especially valuable to look at U.S. efforts in and regarding Europe. Not only was Europe home to most of the international system's great powers for much of the last two centuries, but competition between the continent's key players also defined geopolitics over the same period.² Examining how the United States shaped European security, diplomatic, and (to a lesser extent) economic affairs thus provides a microcosm to study great power shaping efforts in other key regions and domains.

My argument is straightforward. At its root, the shaping strategy of the United States depended on three key elements. The first, power asymmetry, is the most obvious. By the late 1980s, U.S. relative power was ascendant: Within a few years, the United States would be the world's unipole.³ In turn, the sheer agglomeration of power in Washington's control afforded the United States the capacity to influence others' behavior while creating strong incentives for other actors to avoid overtly challenging Washington's preferences.

If power asymmetry helps account for why the United States could engage in shaping, the second variable—quiet coercion—accounts for the manner in which the United States operated. As elaborated below, quiet coercion involved efforts to apply U.S. power in subtle ways behind the scenes to inform the behavior of friends, foes, and neutrals. The objective was to induce compliance with Washington's preferences over the structure of world politics without provoking crises or confrontations that a more heavy-handed application of U.S. power would entail.

Finally, backstopping those elements was a third: policymaker consensus on the ends that were sought. To be sure, the late Cold War and post-Cold War eras saw frequently sharp disagreements among and within different U.S. presidential administrations.⁴ Nevertheless, the core parameters of the sort of world deemed conducive to U.S. interests—one that reinforced U.S. power advantages and enmeshed the United States at the center of international networks—were widely shared by U.S. leaders.⁵ Conversely, alternative approaches were never seriously considered, and their advocates were isolated from the levers of power. This consensus provided a consistency to U.S. shaping efforts that the day-to-day tumult of the U.S. foreign policy debate could obscure.

The remainder of this appendix proceeds in five parts. I briefly discuss the United States' efforts to shape others' behavior during the Cold War era, paying particular attention to the state of play just before the Cold War began wrapping up. This provides a baseline for further analysis. From there, I turn to U.S. efforts to influence the contours of the international system in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the Cold War ended, concurrent with the terminal

² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001; A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918*, Clarendon Press, 1954.

³ Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1, 1990–1991; William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Summer 1999.

⁴ Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11, the Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror*, PublicAffairs Books, 2008.

⁵ Barry R. Posen, "Stability and Change in U.S. Grand Strategy," *Orbis*, Vol. 51, No. 4, Fall 2007.

decline and subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union. Having done so, I shift to U.S. shaping efforts in the early post-Cold War era in the context of an underdocumented struggle between NATO and the nascent EU for preeminence in European security affairs. Examining U.S. strategy at this time is especially insightful, given that debates over the durability of what became the unipolar era were rampant, such that states were grappling for options in a world absent Cold War-era bipolar structures. Finally, I briefly summarize the findings and derive implications—emphasizing the importance of strategic context, alongside policymaker adaptation and circumspection—for successful great power competition today.

Baselining the Analysis: The United States' Cold War Game Plan

U.S. shaping efforts during the Cold War varied over time as the competition with the Soviet Union waxed and waned. At the start, U.S. strategy was predicated on developing a *modus operandi* with the Soviet Union based on a division of Europe, the reconstitution of European (meaning West European) power after the destruction of WWII, and constraints on U.S. involvement in international affairs to ensure solid relations with all parties.⁶ In practice, this meant applying U.S. power to promote Western European political consolidation and economic openness while using U.S. nuclear dominance to check possible Soviet aggrandizement. Because, however, Western Europe's revival could not be accomplished without reviving Germany (and reviving Germany was anathema to Moscow and Germany's other neighbors), the United States was progressively required to take active management of European geopolitical affairs.⁷ As a result, lodestones of the Cold War system, such as NATO and the Bretton Woods arrangements—mechanisms that were initially designed to limit the need of the United States to actively manage world affairs—were gradually transformed into vehicles by which the United States waged the Cold War competition.⁸

Yet if the United States' initial theory of shaping was overtaken by events, the emergence of a firm bipolar competition provided new pathways for the United States to influence others' behavior. The prospect of Soviet domination, for example, afforded the United States leverage with its European allies. After all, by credibly threatening to reduce the U.S. role in regional security, policymakers were occasionally able to solicit greater European economic

⁶ This section draws heavily on Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963*, Princeton University Press, 1999; see also Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, Hill and Wang, 2008.

⁷ Mark S. Sheetz, "Exit Strategies: American Grand Designs for Postwar European Security," *Security Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Summer 1999.

⁸ Kyle M. Lascuertes, *Orders of Exclusion: Great Powers and the Strategic Sources of Foundational Rules in International Relations*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

and defense contributions against the Soviet Union.⁹ Similarly, Chinese-Soviet antagonism allowed the United States to influence China's strategic orientation and economic openness, thus pulling Beijing into the United States' orbit. Meanwhile, because competition with the Soviet Union could plausibly tip into a devastating conflict, bipolarity also afforded the United States some degree of influence over the Soviet Union by incentivizing each side to craft diplomatic understandings and frameworks to keep their competition within limits.¹⁰

Still, the prior point should not be taken too far. With the Soviet Union as Washington's clear and compelling adversary, the United States could also be trapped—and its ability to shape global affairs undermined—by an overly rigid understanding of what competition required. Involvement in peripheral conflicts, including Korea and Vietnam, went forward under the specious assumption that U.S. credibility in Europe and vis-à-vis Moscow was on the line. Likewise, the United States spent at least a decade longer than needed balancing both the Soviet Union and China, in part because Cold War politics (1) precluded recognizing the government in Beijing as the “legitimate” China and (2) foreclosed any possibility of dividing what was perceived to be a solid Soviet-Chinese axis.

Periods of pronounced East-West tension are heavily attributable to an overly dogmatic U.S. understanding of the necessities of bipolar confrontation. When, for instance, members of the Reagan administration decided in the early 1980s that the United States should accelerate its ongoing military buildup, try to arms race Moscow into exhaustion, and seek to delegitimize the USSR at home and abroad, the result was a deepening insecurity spiral and the war scare with Moscow.¹¹ Under such conditions, bipolarity undercut U.S. shaping capacity by encouraging Soviet counterbalancing and raising questions about the sagacity of U.S. international leadership.

Toward Victory over the Soviet Union

By the mid-1980s, however, a combination of Soviet economic mismanagement, sclerotic decisionmaking, and the revival of U.S. economic and military capabilities from their post-Vietnam nadir contributed to a pronounced relative decline in Soviet power.¹² This generated mounting pressure on Moscow to reduce international tensions, break out of what was effec-

⁹ John M. Schuessler and Joshua R. Shiffrin, “The Shadow of Exit from NATO,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Fall 2019.

¹⁰ The core insight is in Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 93, No. 3, Summer 1964; for extension and application, see Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969–1976*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

¹¹ James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War*, Cornell University Press, 2014.

¹² This section draws on Shiffrin, 2018, Chapters 4–5; for Soviet economic problems and the U.S. monitoring thereof, see Marc Trachtenberg, “Assessing Soviet Economic Performance During the Cold War: A Failure of Intelligence?” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, February 2018.

tively the USSR's self-encirclement, and avoid the total bankruptcy of the Soviet system. To be sure, there were many options available to Soviet leaders. With Soviet General Secretary (later President) Mikhail Gorbachev at the helm, however, the decision was made to seek a broad rapprochement with the West that would allow reductions in the Soviet defense budget, free up resources for domestic reform, and enable access to Western technological and economic capabilities.¹³ The objective was not necessarily to throw in the towel but to ratchet down the Cold War and put U.S.-Soviet competition on a more sustainable (for the USSR) footing.

For their part, Washington policymakers took a dim view of the matter. Paralleling Soviet leaders' sense of their decline, policymakers in the Reagan and H. W. Bush administrations recognized that U.S. power was ascendent. By mid-1986, for example, National Security Council staffer Jack Matlock wrote President Ronald Reagan that "the U.S. position is strong, and the momentum in the balance of power is with us."¹⁴ By early 1989, newly confirmed Secretary of State James Baker similarly argued that Gorbachev needed to cope with an "era of stagnation" that constrained Soviet foreign policy options.¹⁵ Yet rather than embrace the accompanying Soviet outreach amid a shifting distribution of power, the response from Reagan and President George H. W. Bush was to encourage and press for continued Soviet concessions that would bolster the U.S. strategic position. The reason for doing so was simple: despite the Soviet Union's best intentions, U.S. leaders from Reagan and Bush downward believed that, so long as the USSR existed as a great power, it would be some kind of a rival to the United States. Hence, it was incumbent on the United States to maximize U.S. relative advantages—as long as doing so did not provoke a preventive crisis or war—to better wage an enduring competition.

This strategy first manifested in debates over nuclear arms control. At the time, U.S.-Soviet arms control talks had broken down because of a combination of Soviet intransigence and the Reagan administration's early 1980s decision to adopt negotiating positions known to be unacceptable to Moscow. With Gorbachev seeking rapprochement, the Soviet Union now began moving toward the U.S. bargaining stance by, for instance, making large-scale reductions in strategic ballistic missiles as desired by the United States. In response, the United States refused to take yes for an answer. Washington countered with proposals designed to constrain core elements in the Soviet nuclear arsenal (including so-called heavy ballistic missiles and intermediate-range forces) while preserving U.S. strengths (e.g., bombers, air-launched cruise missiles, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles). Moreover, Washington

¹³ Chris Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Collapse of the USSR*, University of North Carolina Press, 2016; William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.

¹⁴ Jack F. Matlock, Jr., enclosures to "Poindexter Tasking on U.S.-Soviet Relations," Matlock Files 1983–1986, Box 44, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, May 29, 1986a.

¹⁵ James A. Baker III, annotations on "U.S.-Soviet Relations," Baker Papers, Box 108, Seeley Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, February 10, 1989.

refused to accept long-term limits on the so-called Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a strategic defense program known to be a major source of anxiety in Moscow.¹⁶

As internal documents described, the U.S. objective was to “pocket” Soviet concessions and seek more.¹⁷ As Secretary of State George Shultz put it, U.S. policy needed to focus on “managing change” in U.S.-Soviet relations “through a balance of toughness and inducement” that exploited Soviet problems and sought Soviet concessions “on American terms.”¹⁸ Soviet leaders were aware of these efforts. In one striking exchange, Gorbachev expressly challenged U.S. efforts, telling Shultz “U.S. policy is one of extorting more and more concessions,” Shultz replied, “I’m weeping for you.”¹⁹ With Moscow’s problems growing, however, there was little the USSR could do short of war to change the United States’ course. The eventual Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) of 1987 and 1991 thus codified a nuclear balance that was weighted in favor of the United States and that Moscow could only violate at meaningful reputational and diplomatic costs.

Nor was U.S. coercion limited to the nuclear race. By the late 1980s, Soviet leaders consciously sought ways to exchange Soviet military and diplomatic concessions for Western economic and diplomatic backing.²⁰ The United States responded by challenging the legitimacy of communist governments in the USSR’s Eastern European sphere of influence (especially in Poland). The Reagan administration also refused to renounce support for Afghan militants—even after the Soviets began leaving Afghanistan in May 1988—in an attempt to deny local Soviet clients a political victory.²¹ If anything, Reagan, Shultz, and other policy-makers used Gorbachev’s desire to garner U.S. backing as leverage. A U.S. Department of State report on U.S.-Soviet economic relations argued that U.S.-Soviet economic cooperation would depend “on progress in other areas of the [U.S.-Soviet] political relationship.”²² The result kept pressure on the Soviet position at a time when Soviet leaders were increasingly eager to reduce competition. The pressure thereby reinforced Soviet incentives to concede

¹⁶ Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War*, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

¹⁷ Jack F. Matlock, Jr., “Shultz Recommended Next Steps Post Reykjavik,” Keel Files, Box 91639, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, October 13, 1986b; Jack F. Matlock, Jr., “Next Steps in U.S.-Soviet Relations,” and enclosure to the President, “U.S.-Soviet Relations: Where Do We Go From Here?” Keel Files, Box 91639, October 17, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1986c.

¹⁸ George P. Shultz, “94. Non-Paper Prepared by Secretary of State Shultz,” November 18, 1987, in James Graham Wilson, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988: Vol. VI, Soviet Union, October 1986–January 1989*, U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2016.

¹⁹ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*, Scribner, 1993, p. 894.

²⁰ Zubok, 2009, pp. 289–310.

²¹ Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*, Cornell University Press, 2014, pp. 134–135.

²² George P. Shultz, “U.S.-Soviet Trade,” enclosed in *President Reagan’s Meetings with General Secretary Gorbachev, May 29–June 2, 1988, Background Book*, National Security Archive, George Washington University, undated.

to U.S. demands on political reform in the communist bloc and Soviet involvement in Third World conflicts but without committing the United States to the extent that Washington could not backtrack if Soviet policy took a hardline turn.

Still, it was during the revolutions of 1989 and especially the debate over German reunification in late 1989–early 1990 that demonstrated the core thrust of the United States’ coercive strategy. As noted earlier, questions surrounding Germany drove much of the East-West tension that defined the early Cold War. The division of Germany and the mutual recognition that Washington and Moscow would each have their respective sphere of influence in Germany were the core mechanisms that helped ratchet down Cold War tensions. With Soviet client governments challenged as citizens across Eastern Europe mobilized en masse—a movement that reached its apogee following the opening of the Berlin Wall in November 1989—the United States thus needed to decide whether and to what extent to encourage these movements.²³

The stakes were significant. After all, the loss of East Germany alone would “rip the heart out of the Soviet security system,” just as the loss of Soviet control over all of Eastern Europe would push the USSR back into its pre-WWII borders.²⁴ Under such conditions, it was plausible that Moscow, despite its search for engagement thus far, would use force to arrest change and resist the United States. As a senior National Security Council staff member wrote in a paper endorsed by both President George H. W. Bush and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, “for all the ferment we see in Eastern Europe, I simply do not believe that the *Soviet Union* has yet evolved to the point where it will permit the disintegration of its security buffer which has depended for four decades on Communist Party control.”²⁵ For his part, Scowcroft simply noted that “the instrument of last resort is still available to the Soviet Union and there are no guarantees that the Soviet empire will go quietly into the night.”²⁶

Bush and his team thus embarked on an effort to undermine the Soviet sphere of influence without triggering a crisis. As the revolutions of 1989 gathered steam in the spring and summer of that year, the United States responded by trying to create space for anti-communist protestors to operate in the hopes of fostering change at a pace the Soviet Union and its local

²³ In addition to the previously mentioned *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, please see Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *The Malta Summit and U.S.-Soviet Relations: Testing the Waters Amidst Stormy Seas, New Insights from American Archives*, Cold War International History Project, e-Dossier No. 40, 2013.

²⁴ Brent Scowcroft, “The Soviets and the German Question,” Scowcroft Files, Box 91116, folder “German Unification (November 1989),” George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, November 29, 1989. Similarly, the Central Intelligence Agency concluded that pressure for German Democratic Republic reforms could result in “anti-Soviet violence . . . that might force [the USSR] to intervene militarily” (Directorate of Intelligence, “The German Question and Soviet Policy,” Central Intelligence Agency, November 27, 1989).

²⁵ Peter Rodman, “Why Is Gorbachev Permitting This?” Scowcroft Files, Box 91124, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, July 28, 1989. Emphasis in original.

²⁶ Brent Scowcroft, “The Future of Perestroika and the European Order,” Rice Files, Box CF00717, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, undated [circa December 1, 1989].

proxies could accept.²⁷ In practice, this meant encouraging anti-communist groups—such as Poland’s Solidarity movement—to join power-sharing arrangements with incumbent communist governments to dilute Soviet influence without overtly threatening the status quo. Similarly, Bush and his team sought to soft-pedal talk of German reunification prior to the opening of the Berlin Wall in the hopes of avoiding a Soviet crackdown while still allowing facts on the ground to move against the Soviet position.

Once, however, the Soviet military position in Eastern Europe unraveled following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rapid implosion of communist regimes in the last few months of 1989, U.S. efforts accelerated. By early 1990, the decision was made to subtly shift course and quickly reunify Germany within NATO: that is, to rip the heart out of the Soviet alliance system while preserving the United States’ own network. To do so, Bush embarked on a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, Bush, Scowcroft, Baker, and others went out of their way to reassure Gorbachev that despite the loss of Germany, the United States would respect Soviet equities in post-Cold War Europe. They also emphasized that keeping a reunified Germany in NATO was better for Moscow than a reunified and unmoored Germany. Yet on the other hand, Bush and his advisers struck a deal with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. In exchange for Kohl’s commitment to keep a reunified Germany within NATO, the United States would support Kohl’s desire to reunify Germany and protect his efforts from any Soviet machinations.

To this end, the U.S. and West German governments orchestrated what became known as the Two Plus Four talks to oversee the international politics of reunification. As internal documents indicate, the talks were designed not to decide the conditions under which Germany reunified but rather to give the USSR the sense that it had a seat at the table. This approach did not offer Moscow a vehicle for disrupting what would become a West German rush to take over the functions of the East German state while facilitating the Soviet withdrawal from its forward bases in the German Democratic Republic. Coupled with West German promises of financial support as the Soviet economy continued to implode, continued U.S. efforts to reassure Moscow, and the progressive consolidation of noncommunist regimes throughout Eastern Europe, the result was a resounding Western success. Once Germany formally reunified in October 1990, Europe’s post-Cold War strategic foundation—anchored by a U.S. security commitment via NATO, with a military balance starkly weighted in the United States’ favor, and an ascendant liberal democracy—began to clarify.²⁸

²⁷ Others have criticized the United States for dragging its heels on this matter. See Gregory F. Domber, “Skepticism and Stability: Reevaluating U.S. Policy During Poland’s Democratic Transformation in 1989,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Summer 2011; and Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*, Princeton University Press, 2009.

²⁸ Mary Elise Sarotte, “Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to ‘Bribe the Soviets Out’ and Move NATO In,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Summer 2010.

Protecting and Enshrining NATO

Still, the waning Soviet threat did not automatically mean that the United States would be able to shape the post–Cold War peace. Instead, the retreat of Soviet power in 1990 and its subsequent collapse in 1991 as the USSR imploded removed much of the United States’ leverage for influencing continental affairs. Absent a Soviet threat, it was far from clear why capable countries, such as France and Germany, would maintain U.S. security guarantees, or—less dramatically—defer to U.S. sensitivities in intra-allied disputes and diplomatic debates. Nor was this problem purely speculative. The late 1980s had already seen calls for a European caucus within NATO that would at once recognize the European allies’ growing contributions to the alliance while enabling them to better organize on issues of mutual interest. More importantly, the early 1990s saw France, Germany, the Netherlands, and other U.S. partners working to transform the European Community (EC) into what would become the EU by integrating their economic, diplomatic, and security affairs.

The United States, therefore, at a minimum faced the prospect of a more organized Europe that could better resist U.S. pressure and would be more likely to do so absent a common threat. At worst, it faced the possibility of a coherent and well-organized actor that might challenge U.S. post–Cold War diplomatic and security priorities with attendant implications for economic affairs.²⁹

For U.S. leaders, addressing these risks meant that the United States needed to preserve NATO as Europe’s post–Cold War security provider of choice. For sure, an enduring NATO would not prevent intra-allied disagreements in the absence of the Soviet threat, nor would it guarantee European deference to U.S. concerns. Yet compared with the alternative of an empowered EC/EU, in which the United States expressly did not have a seat at the table, keeping NATO intact and on point would at least provide the United States a pathway for influencing post–Cold War continental debates. Moreover, it would allow Washington to bargain bilaterally with its partners within the alliance, and thus maximize U.S. relative power, rather than negotiate with a single coherent European actor, with whom U.S. advantages would be less pronounced. There would be a domestic payoff as well: Washington was aware that the U.S. public had been reluctant to take on a permanent overseas role after WWII and was concerned that such restraint could be reasserted after the Cold War. Preserving U.S. dominance in Europe via NATO would help beat back possible domestic pressure to reduce U.S. involvement in global affairs.

To do so, 1990–1992 saw the Bush administration move to preserve and reinforce NATO’s post–Cold War centrality. On one level, Bush, Baker, Scowcroft, and their teams sought to coordinate with such allies as the United Kingdom that were relatively skeptical of creating

²⁹ This section draws on Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Eastbound and Down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990–1992,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 43, Nos. 6–7, 2020a; also of interest is Alexandra Homolar, “How to Last Alone at the Top: U.S. Strategic Planning for the Unipolar Era,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2011.

a standalone European organization, while pressuring such states as France and Germany to pursue European integration in a manner that did not rival NATO. Although never stated explicitly, the underlying logic seems to have been to play to and reinforce intra-European dissent about the EC/EU's direction, while making clear the costs traditional U.S. allies would pay in their relationship with Washington if U.S. concerns were ignored. Given the realities of U.S. unipolarity and the uncertainty surrounding Europe's future given the collapse of Soviet power and German reunification, these were powerful tools at Washington's disposal.

This track involved both suasion and coercion. On the former, the United States looked to channel calls for a more active EC in a direction that the United States could tolerate, with Baker, for instance, advocating for a "transatlantic partnership on security affairs with a more confident and united Europe—a partnership consonant with the North Atlantic Treaty."³⁰ The latter track was equally pronounced. Just as the U.S. Department of State sent a pointed demarche to European capitals in early 1991 warning against a separate European security identity that could weaken NATO's role in European security, so too did Bush confront allied heads of state later that year with a blunt warning that "[o]ur premise is that the American role in the Defense and affairs of Europe will not be made superfluous by European union. If our premise is wrong, if, my friends, your ultimate aim is to provide independently for your own Defense, the time to tell us is today."³¹

Still, U.S. endeavors were not limited to simply disincentivizing European efforts that might displace NATO: It was equally vital to foreclose opportunities that might raise questions about NATO's centrality. In practice, this meant demonstrating NATO's relevance to the security vacuum that was created in Central and Eastern Europe because of the Soviet retreat and collapse. Unless NATO demonstrated its ability to address security in that region—so the logic went—such states as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic would turn to the EC/EU, empowering the latter organization at the expense of NATO. Otherwise, the alliance might lose relevance in the Europeans' assessment and undercut the United States' long-term influence.

To address this problem, the Bush administration worked to demonstrate NATO's relevance to Central and Eastern European (CEE) security concerns. This track initially prompted the United States to promote such initiatives as NATO liaison programs to provide avenues for CEE states to raise their concerns with the alliance. Nevertheless, continued pressure by the CEE states and ongoing talk of a more robust European security apparatus soon led the U.S. to push for a more formal NATO presence in the area. Accordingly, in mid-1991, the United States successfully pushed NATO into declaring that the alli-

³⁰ James A. Baker, III, "SecState to All Capitals, 'Guidance on NATO Strategy Review—European Security Identity and Related Issues,'" Zelikow Files, Box CF01354, folder "Six Power Conference [1]," George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, February 21, 1991.

³¹ Charles Krupnick, "Not What They Wanted: American Policy and the European Security and Defense Identity," in Alexander Moens and Christopher Anstis, eds., *Disconcerted Europe: The Search for a New Security Architecture*, Westview, 1994, p. 130.

ance's security was "inseparably linked to that of all other states in Europe," by definition, entangling the United States in CEE security affairs.³² By early 1992, U.S. efforts escalated further when, faced with reports of CEE states exploring EC/EU membership, the United States moved to look into the conditions under which NATO would expand in Central and Eastern Europe and signaled that NATO membership for former Warsaw Pact members was now on the table. The point, as one high-level document explained, was simple: In order to avoid NATO from becoming "marginalized" in the face of "an expanded EC/WEU [Western European Union]," NATO needed to move east.³³ NATO's eastern enlargement—a hallmark of the United States' post-Cold War grand strategy—was now part of U.S. strategy, driven in large part by a desire to protect the alliance as a vehicle for U.S. power projection in the face of European-led alternatives.

For sure, subsequent events—such as the tepid response to the Maastricht Treaty that formally created the EU and the inability of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom to effectively address Yugoslavia's implosion—underlined that concerns about a rival to NATO were overblown. Likewise, questions could have been raised, even at the time, as to whether the disparate states of Europe would be able to make common cause in security affairs in ways that challenged U.S. dominance. U.S. concerns about a European challenge to NATO, however, were real and the policy response critical to the post-Cold War security system. The United States, having been dragged reluctantly into the active management of European security affairs as the Soviet threat loomed after WWII, worked diligently to preserve its NATO-led dominance of European security even absent a great power competitor. Washington at once shaped Europe's geopolitical system and put itself in a position to continue doing so into the future.

Conclusions and Implications

By the 1992 presidential election, the United States had effectively shaped Europe's post-Cold War trajectory. With the Soviet Union defeated, the United States had the wherewithal and opportunity to apply its exceptional capabilities to structure European politics with limited risk of blowback or powerful opposition. Meanwhile, NATO's dual preservation and enshrinement as Europe's security provider of first resort—coupled with a commitment to enlargement—provided the United States with a singularly capable vehicle for influencing continental affairs. These foundations have remained intact until recent years, when the relative resurgence of Russian power, China's rise, and NATO's expansion into areas where Rus-

³² NATO, "Partnership with the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe: Statement Issued by the North Atlantic Council Meeting in Ministerial Session," June 7, 1991.

³³ "Implications for NATO of Expanded WEU Membership," undated, enclosed with David Gompert to Robert Zoellick et al., "ESSG Meeting, Monday, 30 March 1992, 3:00 p.m.–4:00 p.m., Situation Room," Gompert Files, Box CF01301, folder "European Strategy [Steering] Group," George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, March 26, 1992.

sian capabilities can adumbrate U.S. strengths have undercut the logic of U.S. policy. In the interim, the United States was able to capitalize on its late Cold War shaping efforts vis-à-vis the USSR and the nascent EC/EU to influence the contours of the post-Cold War period.

Several implications for success in great power competition follow. First, success in any great power competition requires careful calibration to the structure of the international system and, in particular, the presence and interest of other great powers. The U.S.-Soviet competition was helped by the fact that the two countries were locked in a decidedly bipolar contest, which meant that the United States could afford to focus almost exclusively on the Soviet Union; by the same token, the U.S. effort vis-à-vis post-Cold War Europe was aided by the absence of other great powers writ large (some of the U.S. effort could be interpreted as an exercise in foreclosing a future EU competitor).

Had other great powers existed, however, it is not difficult to imagine that U.S. objectives, alongside the costs and risks of the pursuit of those objectives, would have been different. Consider a scenario with a third great power in the U.S.-Soviet competition. In that situation, Washington would have needed to devote energy and resources to managing this other important relationship (regardless of whether that great power was an ally or an adversary), which would have meant that the possibility of the Soviet Union at some point becoming vulnerable as a great power would have been questionable. Moreover, even if it had appeared that the USSR was on the ropes, another great power would have limited U.S. opportunity and incentive to press the Soviets to the wall and to seek all-out victory because of the prospect of the third power countering U.S. efforts. The same applies to post-Cold War shaping efforts: Had other great powers existed after the Cold War, U.S. time and attention would have naturally been pulled toward those issues, thereby limiting the time and effort the United States could put toward preserving and later enlarging NATO. In other words, U.S. success in the post-1945 world was not just due to U.S. policy positions but to calibrating those positions to the structure of the international game.

Second, by the same token, U.S. policymakers today would be wise to avoid overstating the United States' agency in its strategic success. On one level, the United States was playing with a stacked deck after 1945. Not only was the USSR significantly weaker and less developed than the United States after WWII, but the post-Cold War concern with an autonomous EU that would drive the United States out of Europe assumes away the significant internecine differences that have long divided the various European states. Without in any way diminishing the scale of the Soviet challenge or the EU's potential, it remains true that the United States entered the postwar great power competition in a privileged position and built on that position accordingly. It is thus a dangerous illusion to ascribe Washington's successes to sagacious policy choices: The United States' advantageous position was equally, if not more, important.

In turn, it would be the height of folly to assume that finding the right mix of policy options today would generate success in competition with Russia, China, or others; actions and decisions that are made in Washington will only take the United States so far. To extend the point, the more that the United States seeks to ensure success in today's great power com-

petitions by crafting policies designed to reclaim the United States' post-Cold War primacy, the more this effort could falter: After all, not only do the challenges posed by China, Russia, and others suggest a more complex set of problems than after 1945, but it is also dangerous to assume that other countries will sign up for policies that will privilege the United States. Put differently, structure matters but smart policy can only compensate so much for deeper systemic trends.

Third, success requires flexibility and midcourse adaptation: It is too much to define a particular outcome or to prescribe a specific set of tools at Time 1 and expect it to lead to success at Time 2. U.S. strategy during the Cold War and after illustrates the point. For all that the outward structures of U.S. policy—a military presence in Europe and Asia, opposition to Moscow, partnerships such as NATO and the U.S.-Japan alliance, and so on—that seemingly remained stable from the post-WWII years onward, the ends-means chain by which these tools were linked to outcomes shifted profoundly over time. The initial vision of containment, for instance, was not intended for the United States to dominate Europe. U.S. competition with the USSR was not (despite what pop historians and policymakers otherwise claim) designed to collapse the Soviet Union. NATO was not originally crafted to be a pan-European security system.

Instead, U.S. policymakers adopted a kind of limited flexibility in their strategic efforts by embracing new strategic objectives as opportunities presented themselves. By the same token, and even as they were reluctant to create or design new systems and tools to pursue these new objectives, Washington policymakers did alter key elements of existing tools and techniques to better pursue these new strategies (for instance, changing NATO from an anti-Soviet alliance into primarily a vehicle for U.S. power projection). That said, the broad successes of the United States after 1945 should not obscure the possibility that it was not flexible *enough*—that Washington's reluctance to consider changing the tools for these new strategic objectives may have made the U.S. road more costly and more difficult than necessary. At a time when competition with both Russia and China is heating up, the implication is clear: Not only does the United States need to accept that adaptation rather than liturgical adherence to strategic precepts will be necessary, but so too should policymakers accept that adaptation may require changes to both the ends *and* the means of U.S. policy.

Fourth and finally, strategists would be wise to recognize that the intent behind their strategy choices—and the outcomes and effects of said choices—can be quite distinct. For all the talk by policymakers in the Reagan and Bush administrations of weakening the Soviet Union or ensuring that NATO endured over the EU, they equally believed that those actions were ultimately a desirable outcome for *both the United States and others*. Relative strength versus the Soviet Union, for instance, was believed to aid stability in the bilateral relationship, just as preserving NATO against a European challenge was believed to be central to preserving post-Cold War peace. Nevertheless, Soviet and European policymakers did not always see it this way.

The responses of the Soviets and the Europeans thus could have been inimical to U.S. interests: the depths of the second Cold War of the early to mid-1980s, for example, reflected

a Soviet calculation that U.S. pressure should be resisted to the greatest extent possible; the uncertainty and risks that U.S. leaders were acutely fearful of during the 1989 revolutions reflected a sense that the Soviets might not see their interests as in line with the United States; Europe's desire for a more autonomous security role in the early 1990s reflected a calculation that U.S. leadership was not always in the Europeans' interests; and so on. As the United States faces renewed competitive pressures, this situation directs attention to the basic reality that even seemingly benign intentions can be misinterpreted and that the outcomes that are beneficial to one state might be unacceptable to others—including, in some cases, allies. The inverse also holds: Others' actions that seem incompatible with U.S. interests could themselves be driven by benign (or at least nonmalicious) intentions. In seeking competitive success today, U.S. strategists thus need to reflect and, before setting policy, question whether others are correctly interpreting U.S. strategy and whether they themselves are accurately accounting for others' ambitions.

Rivalry Database: Total Number

Table F.1 presents a list of 165 bilateral rivalries from 1816 to 2010 drawn from William Thompson and David Dreyer's *Handbook of International Rivalries*. We then used the handbook's case narratives to code additional features of each rivalry, specifically

- whether each rivalry ended with a formal settlement
- whether each rivalry ended when one or more rivals underwent leadership transitions
- whether each rivalry's end involved the use of force (by a rival or another party).

A number 1 indicates that an outcome has occurred, and a 0 indicates that an outcome has not occurred.

TABLE F.1
Rivalry Database: Total Number

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
Austria-France	1494	1918	1	1	0	1	1	0
Austria-Hungary–Ottoman Empire	1494	1908	1	1	0	0	0	0
Ottoman Empire–Russia	1668	1918	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain-France 2	1731	1904	0	0	0	0	0	0
France-Prussia	1756	1955	1	1	0	1	1	0
Austria-Russia	1768	1918	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain-Russia	1778	1956	0	0	0	0	0	0
Afghanistan-Iran 1	1816	1937	0	0	1	0	0	0
China-Russia 1	1816	1949	0	0	0	1	0	0
Britain–United States	1816	1904	0	0	0	0	0	0
Iran–Ottoman Empire	1816	1932	0	0	1	0	0	0
Argentina-Brazil	1817	1985	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bolivia-Peru	1825	1932	0	0	1	0	0	0
Colombia-Peru	1827	1935	0	0	1	0	0	0
Greece–Ottoman Empire	1827	1930	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table F.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
Colombia-Ecuador	1830	1919	0	0	1	0	0	0
Ecuador-Peru	1830	1998	0	0	1	0	0	0
Colombia-Venezuela	1831		0	0	0	0	0	0
Chile-Peru	1832	1929	0	0	1	0	0	0
Bolivia-Chile	1836		0	0	0	0	0	0
Britain-China	1839	1900	1	1	0	0	0	0
El Salvador-Honduras	1840	1992	0	0	1	0	0	0
El Salvador-Guatemala	1842	1906	1	0	0	0	0	0
Argentina-Chile	1843	1991	0	0	0	0	0	0
Honduras-Nicaragua 1	1844	1961	0	0	1	0	0	0
Austria-Italy	1847	1918	1	1	0	1	1	0
Guatemala-Honduras	1850	1930	0	0	1	0	0	0
Guatemala-Nicaragua	1855	1907	0	0	0	1	0	0
China-France	1858	1900	1	1	0	0	0	0
China-Japan 1	1873	1945	1	1	0	1	1	0
Bulgaria-Romania	1878	1945	1	0	0	1	0	0
Bulgaria-Greece	1878	1947	1	0	0	0	0	0

Table F.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
Bulgaria–Ottoman Empire	1878	1950	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bulgaria–Serbia	1878	1955	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ottoman Empire–Serbia	1878	1918	1	1	0	1	1	0
Greece–Serbia	1879	1953	0	0	0	0	0	0
France–Italy	1881	1940	0	0	0	1	1	0
Ethiopia–Italy	1882	1943	0	0	0	1	0	0
Italy–Ottoman Empire	1884	1943	1	1	0	1	1	0
Bolivia–Paraguay	1887	1938	0	0	1	0	0	0
Germany–United States	1889	1918	1	1	0	1	1	0
Germany–Russia 2	1890	1945	1	1	0	1	1	0
Japan–Russia	1894	1945	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain–Germany 1	1896	1918	1	1	0	1	1	0
China–Germany	1897	1900	1	1	0	0	0	0
Japan–United States	1898	1945	1	1	0	1	1	0
Austria–Serbia	1903	1920	1	1	0	1	1	0
Albania–Greece	1913	1996	0	0	0	0	0	0
Germany–Poland	1918	1939	1	1	0	1	1	0

Table F.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
Hungary-Romania	1918	1948	1	0	0	1	0	0
Hungary-Serbia	1918	1945	1	1	0	1	0	0
Poland-Russia	1918	1939	1	1	0	1	1	0
Italy-Serbia	1918	1954	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lithuania-Poland	1919	1939	1	0	0	1	0	0
Czechoslovakia-Hungary	1920	1938	1	0	0	1	0	0
Czechoslovakia-Poland	1920	1938	1	0	0	1	0	0
Costa Rica-Panama	1921	1941	1	0	0	0	0	0
Britain-Japan	1932	1945	1	1	0	1	1	0
Iran-Iraq 1	1932	1939	0	0	0	1	0	0
Iraq-Saudi Arabia 1	1932	1957	0	0	0	1	0	0
Saudi Arabia-Yemen 1	1932	1934	1	1	0	0	0	0
Czechoslovakia-Germany	1933	1938	1	1	0	1	1	0
Germany-United States 2	1933	1945	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain-Germany 2	1934	1945	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain-Italy	1934	1943	1	1	0	1	1	0
Egypt-Iraq	1943		0	0	0	0	0	0

Table F.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
Russia–United States 1	1945	1989	1	0	0	0	0	1
Egypt-Jordan	1946	1970	0	0	0	0	0	1
Iraq-Syria	1946		0	0	0	0	0	0
Jordan–Saudi Arabia	1946	1958	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jordan-Syria	1946		0	0	0	0	0	0
Syria-Turkey	1946	2004	0	0	0	0	0	0
Afghanistan-Pakistan	1947		0	0	0	0	0	0
India-Pakistan	1947		0	0	0	0	0	0
Costa Rica–Nicaragua 2	1948	1990	0	0	0	0	0	1
Egypt-Israel	1948		0	0	0	0	0	0
Iraq-Israel	1948		0	0	0	0	0	0
Israel-Jordan	1948	1994	0	0	0	0	0	0
Israel-Syria	1948		0	0	0	0	0	0
North Korea–South Korea	1948		0	0	0	0	0	0
China-India	1948		0	0	0	0	0	0
Russia-Serbia	1948	1955	0	0	0	0	0	1
China-Taiwan	1949		0	0	0	0	0	0

Table F.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
China–United States 1	1949	1972	0	0	1	0	0	0
West Germany–East Germany	1949	1973	0	0	1	0	0	0
Indonesia–Netherlands	1951	1962	0	0	1	0	0	0
North Vietnam–South Vietnam	1954	1975	0	0	0	1	1	0
Thailand–Vietnam 2	1954	1988	0	0	0	0	0	0
Egypt–Iran 1	1955	1971	0	0	0	0	0	1
Greece–Turkey 2	1955		0	0	0	0	0	0
Morocco–Spain	1956	1991	0	0	1	0	0	0
Cambodia–South Vietnam	1956	1975	0	0	0	1	0	0
Egypt–Saudi Arabia	1957	1970	0	0	0	0	0	1
China–Russia 2	1958	1989	0	0	0	0	0	1
Iran–Iraq 2	1958		0	0	0	0	0	0
Cuba–United States	1959		0	0	0	0	0	0
Ethiopia–Somalia	1960		0	0	0	0	0	0
Burkina Faso–Mali	1960	1986	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table F.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
Ghana–Ivory Coast	1960	1970	0	0	0	1	0	0
Ghana–Nigeria	1960	1966	0	0	0	1	0	0
Ghana–Togo	1960	1995	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mauritania–Morocco	1960	1969	0	0	1	0	0	0
Iraq–Kuwait	1961		0	0	0	0	0	0
Egypt–Syria	1961	1990	0	0	0	0	0	0
Saudi Arabia–Syria	1961	1970	0	0	0	1	0	0
Burundi–Rwanda	1962	1966	0	0	0	0	0	1
Algeria–Morocco	1962		0	0	0	0	0	0
Indonesia–Malaysia	1962	1966	0	0	0	1	0	0
Kenya–Somalia	1963	1981	0	0	1	0	0	0
Sudan–Uganda 1	1963	1972	0	0	0	1	0	0
Malawi–Tanzania	1964	1994	0	0	0	0	0	1
Malawi–Zambia	1964	1986	0	0	1	0	0	0
Chad–Sudan 1	1964	1969	0	0	0	0	0	1
Ethiopia–Sudan	1965		0	0	0	0	0	0

Table F.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
Argentina–United Kingdom	1965		0	0	0	0	0	0
Malaysia–Singapore	1965		0	0	0	0	0	0
Rhodesia–Zambia	1965	1979	0	0	0	1	1	0
South Africa–Zambia	1965	1991	0	0	0	0	0	1
Chad–Libya	1966	1994	0	0	1	0	0	0
Guyana–Venezuela	1966		0	0	0	0	0	0
South Yemen–Yemen	1967	1990	0	0	1	0	0	1
Iraq–Saudi Arabia 2	1968		0	0	0	0	0	0
Tanzania–Uganda	1971	1979	0	0	0	1	0	0
Equatorial Guinea–Gabon	1972		0	0	0	0	0	0
Oman–South Yemen	1972	1982	0	0	0	0	0	0
Egypt–Libya	1973	1992	0	0	1	0	0	0
Libya–Sudan	1973	1985	0	0	0	1	0	0
China–Vietnam	1973	1991	0	0	0	0	0	0
Angola–Democratic Republic of Congo	1975	1997	0	0	0	1	0	0
Angola–South Africa	1975	1988	0	0	1	0	0	0

Table F.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
Mozambique-Rhodesia	1975	1979	0	0	0	1	1	0
Cameroon-Nigeria	1975		0	0	1	0	0	0
Cambodia-Vietnam	1976	1983	0	0	0	1	1	0
Mozambique-South Africa	1976	1991	0	0	0	0	0	1
Colombia-Nicaragua	1979	1990	0	0	0	0	0	1
Iran-Saudi Arabia	1979		0	0	0	0	0	0
Egypt-Iran 2	1979		0	0	0	0	0	0
Iran-Israel	1979		0	0	0	0	0	0
Honduras-Nicaragua 2	1980	1987	0	0	1	0	0	0
South Africa-Zimbabwe	1980	1992	0	0	0	0	0	1
Belize-Guatemala	1981	1991	0	0	1	0	0	0
Bahrain-Qatar	1986	2001	0	0	1	0	0	0
Kenya-Uganda	1987	1994	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kenya-Sudan	1989	1994	0	0	0	0	0	0
Guinea Bissau-Senegal	1989	1993	0	0	1	0	0	0
Mauritania-Senegal	1989	1995	0	0	1	0	0	0
Saudi Arabia-Yemen 2	1990	2000	0	0	1	0	0	0

Table F.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Rivalry Ends with					Change of Government (Without Force)
			Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	
Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan	1991		0	0	0	0	0	0
Egypt-Sudan	1991		0	0	0	0	0	0
Croatia-Serbia	1991	2002	0	0	0	0	0	0
Armenia-Azerbaijan	1991		0	0	0	0	0	0
Bosnia-Croatia	1992		0	0	0	0	0	0
Bosnia-Serbia	1992		0	0	0	0	0	0
Eritrea-Sudan	1993		0	0	0	0	0	0
Sudan-Uganda 2	1994		0	0	0	0	0	0
Democratic Republic of Congo–Rwanda	1996	2009	0	0	1	0	0	1
Democratic Republic of Congo–Uganda	1996	2009	0	0	1	0	0	1
Afghanistan-Iran 2	1996	2001	0	0	0	1	0	0
Djibouti-Eritrea	1996		0	0	0	0	0	0
China-Japan 2	1996		0	0	0	0	0	0
China–United States 2	1996		0	0	0	0	0	0
Eritrea-Ethiopia	1998		0	0	0	0	0	0
Rwanda-Uganda	1999	2009	0	0	1	0	0	0

Table F.1—Continued

			Rivalry Ends with					
Name	Start Year	End Year	Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Government (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Government (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Government (Without Force)
Chad-Sudan 2	2004		0	0	0	0	0	0
Russia–United States 2	2007		0	0	0	0	0	0

SOURCE: Features information from Thompson and Dreyer, 2013.

Rivalry Cases: Great Powers

Table G.1 presents a list of 30 bilateral rivalries in which both rivals were major powers, as defined by the Correlates of War Project’s State System Membership dataset. We coded all of the mentioned features in Appendix F for these rivalries and coded how each rivalry ended according to our own typology of rivalry outcomes. A number 1 indicates that an outcome has occurred, and a 0 indicates that an outcome has not occurred.

TABLE G.1
Rivalry Cases: Great Powers

Name	Start Year	End Year	Type of Rivalry Outcome	Subtype of Rivalry Outcome	Rivalry Ends by					
					Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Govt. (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Govt. (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Govt. (Without Force)
Austria-France	1494	1918	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Comprehensive loss in total war	1	1	0	1	1	0
Austria–Ottoman Empire	1494	1908	Voluntary exit from rivalry by one or both sides	Seek accommodation or stable peace with rival(s) as superior or necessary route to achieving national interests	1	1	0	0	0	0
Ottoman Empire–Russia	1668	1918	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain-France 2	1731	1904	Voluntary exit from rivalry by one or both sides	Seek exit from rivalry to focus on different threat	0	0	0	0	0	0
France-Prussia	1756	1955	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0
Austria-Russia	1768	1918	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Comprehensive loss in total war	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain-Russia	1778	1956	Voluntary exit from rivalry by one or both sides	Accept secondary or middle power status	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table G.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Type of Rivalry Outcome	Subtype of Rivalry Outcome	Rivalry Ends by					
					Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Govt. (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Govt. (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Govt. (Without Force)
China-Russia 1	1816	1949	Sociopolitical transformation or fragmentation	Political transformation, revolution, or instability	0	0	0	1	0	0
Britain–United States	1816	1904	Voluntary exit from rivalry by one or both sides	Seek exit from rivalry to focus on different threat	0	0	0	0	0	0
Britain-China	1839	1900	Voluntary exit from rivalry by one or both sides	Seek accommodation or stable peace with rival(s) as superior or necessary route to achieving national interests	1	1	0	0	0	0
Austria-Italy	1847	1918	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Comprehensive loss in total war	1	1	0	1	1	0
China-France	1858	1900	Voluntary exit from rivalry by one or both sides	Seek accommodation or stable peace with rival(s) as superior or necessary route to achieving national interests	1	1	0	0	0	0
China-Japan 1	1873	1945	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0

Table G.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Type of Rivalry Outcome	Subtype of Rivalry Outcome	Rivalry Ends by					
					Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Govt. (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Govt. (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Govt. (Without Force)
France-Italy	1881	1940	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	0	0	0	1	1	0
Germany–United States	1889	1918	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Comprehensive loss in total war	1	1	0	1	1	0
Germany-Russia 2	1890	1945	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0
Japan-Russia	1894	1945	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain-Germany 1	1896	1918	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Comprehensive loss in total war	1	1	0	1	1	0
China-Germany	1897	1900	Voluntary exit from rivalry by one or both sides	Seek accommodation or stable peace with rival(s) as superior or necessary route to achieving national interests	1	1	0	0	0	0
Japan–United States	1898	1945	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain-Japan	1932	1945	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0
Germany–United States 2	1933	1945	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0

Table G.1—Continued

Name	Start Year	End Year	Type of Rivalry Outcome	Subtype of Rivalry Outcome	Rivalry Ends by					
					Formal Settlement (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Formal Settlement (by Force, by Rival)	Formal Settlement (Without Force)	Change of Govt. (by Force, Any Aggressor)	Change of Govt. (by Force, by Rival)	Change of Govt. (Without Force)
Britain-Germany 2	1934	1945	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0
Britain-Italy	1934	1943	Comprehensive victory or defeat	Conquest or occupation	1	1	0	1	1	0
Russia–United States 1	1945	1989	Sociopolitical transformation or fragmentation	Fragmentation of the political entity	1	0	0	0	0	1
China–United States 1	1949	1972	Voluntary exit from rivalry by one or both sides	Seek exit from rivalry to focus on different threat	0	0	1	0	0	0
China-Russia 2	1958	1989	Sociopolitical transformation or fragmentation	Fragmentation of the political entity	0	0	0	0	0	1
China-Japan 2	1996				0	0	0	0	0	0
China–United States 2	1996				0	0	0	0	0	0
Russia–United States 2	2007				0	0	0	0	0	0

SOURCE: Features information from the Correlates of War Project, 2017.

NOTE: govt. = government.

Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CEE	Central and Eastern European
EC	European Community
EU	European Union
GDP	gross domestic product
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II

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The United States, according to official U.S. national security statements and an avalanche of commentary since about 2016, is engaged in a long-term strategic rivalry with China and a lesser—but still critical—rivalry for influence with Russia. Many U.S. strategy documents refer to the concept of strategic competition, but the core idea—and increasingly the reality—of these relationships matches the classic historical concept of a great power rivalry. These rivalries, especially with China, promise to define U.S. foreign policy and national security challenges for decades. Yet most assessments of these rivalries tend to ignore the critical question of outcomes.

This report is part of a larger project on the societal sources of national dynamism and competitive advantage. This research aims to identify historical modes of strategic success and failure in great power rivalries that offer lessons for the United States. The authors define categories of success and failure (in terms of such variables as control over territory, relative power, victory or defeat in war, international legitimacy, and social stability) and present detailed case studies on specific historical examples that are associated with success and failure. They also discuss the implications of the typologies of both kinds of outcomes for the rivalry with China.

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