

*Notes on World History and Learning in International Politics*  
by Lloyd Etheredge

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To study changes in international behavior, one approach is to establish a baseline—the standard behavior of nation-states as this can be observed since their inception in the 16th century. I'll take a description of this baseline to be the narrative of the realist tradition in political science—i.e.:

—The cast of actors—states—shows behavior atypical of what we would find in a sample of ordinary, statistically average individuals. If we were to describe the baseline behavior of nation-states in human terms, they would be extraordinarily high in motivation for power, money, and status—and single-minded about such pursuits. There would be no apparent affiliation motivation or love. They would be rational, self-interested actors—a term which means, in practice, they are amoral and selfish. When in positions of dominance, and when they can get away with it, they would tend to take the view that “the strong take what they can, the weak suffer what they must.” They would also be potentially treacherous, opportunistic, and highly Machiavellian, admitting (in the classic phrase) to “permanent interests but no permanent allies.”

—Being located in a world with other nation-states who are similarly motivated—to get as much as they can get away with—induces the realistic fear of becoming a victim of the predatory ambition of one's neighbors. Thus, calculation based upon the desire for security shapes foreign policy decision-making alongside the triad of the competitive ambitions to maximize power, money, and status.

The unpleasant drama these competitive and insecure “maximizers” have created over the past 500 years can be summarized in three-and-a-half acts, outlined in Table 1.

*Table 1*  
*Hegemonic Wars: 1495-1989*

| <u>War</u><br>Loser  | <u>Thirty years</u><br>Hapsburgs | <u>Napoleonic</u><br>France | <u>WW I &amp; II</u><br>Germany |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| New Leader<br>(economically<br>strongest, winning<br>coalition)                              | Netherlands                      | Britain                     | U.S.                            |
| Eventual<br>challenger<br>(winning coalition,<br>but economically<br>devastated by last war) | France                           | Germany                     | USSR                            |

## Act 1

In the first act, 1495 to 1648, the Hapsburg family, linking Vienna and Madrid, seeks to dominate the rest of Europe—and everybody else maneuvers to prevent them from doing so.<sup>1</sup> The conflict becomes especially fierce because of the Hapsburgs' Catholicism and the Protestantism of the European states opposed to them.

The final showdown with the Hapsburgs—and their defeat—is the exhausting series of wars, grouped as the Thirty Years War, ended by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

## Act 2

In a repeated pattern, the exhaustion and devastation of the Great Power hegemonic wars now creates the opportunity for the least exhausted member of the winning coalition (in this case, the Netherlands) to expand its influence. However, it lacks the natural endowments to become the new long-term hegemon. As they rebuild, France and England increasingly compete with one another for this position.<sup>2</sup> The second act reaches its climax in Napoleon's bold effort to break out of a normal framework of inter-state relations and secure hegemony by conquering the rest of Europe. It ends with his defeat at Waterloo in 1815 and the Congress of Vienna.

## Act 3

The third act is the rise of Britain—the least exhausted member of the winning coalition against Napoleon—to world leadership. The eventual challenger for hegemony is a unified, industrializing Germany. World Wars I and II are two phases of the same war—i.e., a prolonged contest between Germany's hegemonic ambitions and the efforts of other nations to contain Germany.

## Act 4

Act 4 opens with America (the least exhausted member of the winning alliance, producing 40% of the world's GNP) emerging as the new world leader.

In its new role America—like Britain in the 19th century—has been engaged almost continually in conflicts on the periphery of its spheres of influence. These brushfire and proxy wars, and covert operations, have been directed primarily against its emerging rival, the USSR and its allies. Like Britain (or, earlier, the Romans) America has also located large numbers of its own troops in forward deployment along the frontiers (today, approximately 750,000, including naval personnel).<sup>3</sup>

Such, at least, is the realist or *realpolitik* baseline story of world politics.

What has changed?

### *Restructuring Decisions*

Since 1945, I see three major types of (restructuring—

I'll call them Class I) foreign policy decisions to change—or try to change—the traditional patterns of nation-state behavior.

### *A. Recent developments: from enmity to cooperation*

Recent, prominent, and unexpected efforts to restructure international relationships from enmity to cooperation: 1) Nixon's trip to China; 2) Sadat's visit to Israel and the Camp David accords which followed; 3) Gorbachev's extraordinary reforms. If these initiatives turn out to be genuine changes, abandoning the dream of a zero-sum, hegemonic pecking order with one's own nation at the top, they will be unprecedented.

### *B. Post World War II statesmanship: Institutionalizing cooperation*

We've had 45 years without a war between France and Germany (or on the mainland of Europe)—a miracle in world history. The post World War II system-restructuring decisions of genuine statesmen (European and American) are a monumental achievement—especially against the background of the previous 450 years of nationalism.

In this category (in addition to the European Economic Community) I would place the emergence of free trade, especially the so-called GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) regime: until this century, a great many wars have involved quests for wealth—access to raw materials, labor, and markets, cutting out competitors. The GATT regime has ended that cause of war—another structural transformation that has altered the nature of international relations. I would also put the shift to freely fluctuating exchange rates in this tradition. Like the decoupling of Church and State, the decoupling of economic market competition from the state has been (so far) a brilliant innovation which has altered everyone's behavior.

### *C. Standing up to hegemons*

The 500-year-old pattern of hegemonic empires has, in part, ended (even, in late 1989, in the Soviet sphere). Dominated peoples now stand up to, rather than get pushed around by, hegemons. Decolonization wars, the "breaks" of Tito with Stalin, of China with Russia, America's failure in Vietnam and Russia's in Afghanistan, the Arab oil embargo, and the end of the successful application of the Monroe Doctrine (Cuba, Nicaragua) are among the cases.

Do these changes augur well? There are two possibilities:

#### *Scenario 1—Much Worse*

If the decision-making of previous history repeats itself, the prospects for the future are dangerous and grim. Historically, the periods of decline by the previous hegemon (e.g., the US) have stirred increasing competition and violence. Thus we might expect, after an interim period of confusion, increased outbreaks of war between states and among ethnic groups (e.g., Eastern Europe and Russian nationalities). Third World states have now acquired the military capacity to repeat, with each other, the West European history of attempted conquest and empire-building

(e.g., Brazil in Latin American) and can be expected to do so. The presence of nuclear weapons makes prospects for the future even more grim.

### *Scenario 2—Much Better*

The second scenario is that things get much better. The presence of nuclear weapons sobers people. Intellectual learning continues and rational, long-term, cooperative planning increases (today is probably the first time in history when the decision-making and decision-influencing groups of the major powers are college-educated); changes in international telecommunications technology begin to alter national identifications; a consensus favorable to human rights strengthens such norms and thereby both reduces political conflict and increases the general level of humanitarian responsiveness in the international system and domestically.

It could go either way.

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1. For this overview and table I draw upon Joshua S. Goldstein, *Long Cycles: Prosperity and War in the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 346 et passim. and Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, 1500-2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

2. For example, the French and the Dutch aided the rebels in North America to sever from Britain one of its most potentially lucrative colonies.

3. These, and following contemporary numbers, are from Ruth Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures, 1987-88* (Washington, D.C.: World Priorities, Inc., 1988) 12th edition.

Since World War II nation-states have continued, in several other respects, the behavior of earlier centuries—for example, a strong inclination to build military capabilities. World GNP/capita has expanded by 160% since 1960 (in constant 1984 US dollars), world arms expenditures/capita (in constant 1984 US dollars) have continued to grow faster, by 240%.

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