The Return of Prudence and the End of Dreams? Global Multipolarity, Structural Pressure, and the Twilight of Liberal Interventionism

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Abstract

Military intervention under a liberal banner has been a characteristic of the two decades that constitute the post-Cold War world. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Western democracies have operated in an international environment that has permitted the use of military force in pursuit of humanitarian goals in a way that had not been feasible when their sole strategic priority was defence against a rival superpower. The United States has enjoyed a twenty-year period of such marked military superiority that no other major state has been capable of impeding its international freedom of manoeuvre through force of arms; a situation commonly described as unipolarity. For their part, other NATO states have been at liberty to use their reduced-but-still-capable military forces for purposes other than territorial defence, safe under a doubly benign combination of the US security umbrella and Russian weakness. In short, the structural conditions of the international system have been highly favourable for North American and European liberal democracies to engage in domestically-motivated military interventions in pursuit of worthy humanitarian goals. Indeed, there has often appeared to be no down-side to liberal interventionism, at least when open-ended counterinsurgency campaigns can be avoided; an appearance compounded by professional armed forces that detach a majority of voters from military service, and by the seeming ability of Western economies to support constant medium-intensity warfare prior to the financial crisis of 2008. As we move forward into the third decade of the post-Cold War world, however, these permissive structural conditions are being eroded, and it is the causes and consequences of this structural shift that will be the focus of this paper. Meaningful great power competition is returning to the international system, as the rise of China and India – and the resurgence of Russia – continues vis-à-vis Western states; a rise that was accelerated – though not caused – by the financial crisis and subsequent low growth in the US and European economies after 2008. This return of multipolarity is a product of the catch-up growth engendered by an integrated global economy, and has occurred previously in history. The result is that Western powers’ willingness and ability to engage in liberal military intervention is now coming under pressure, and this pressure is likely to increase going forwards.
Introduction

Has international politics fundamentally changed since the end of the Cold War? Has the destructive great power competition that characterised the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries finally been expunged early in the twenty-first? Do policymakers in affluent, cosmopolitan Western capitals – closely allied and integrated with other Euro-Atlantic partners as they are – ever again need to prepare for a world in which large and advanced economies might unleash their colossal military-industrial potential against one another? And if they do not, does this mean that the post-Cold War trend towards liberal military intervention in pursuit of worthy humanitarian intervention by these same Western states represents a durable shift away from realpolitik in their strategic behaviour? These are questions that have been a pressing focus of the academic International Relations (IR) profession for the last twenty years – and in European academia at least, the consensus view has become a belief that something has indeed fundamentally shifted; an assessment that the European experience itself would seem to support.¹

This paper takes issue with such claims. It argues that – far from representing the final coming of the post-military age – the first decade of the twenty-first century can be seen as the period in which the underlying prerequisites for great power security competition began to return to the international system. If the 1990s was a decade in which US unipolarity was so overwhelming as to render all second-tier major powers essentially irrelevant to the conduct of international politics in anything but a marginal capacity, the 2000s was the decade in which global economic forces made the post-Cold War ‘unipolar moment’ unlikely to endure. Major power security competition is already returning to the international system, as large but hitherto-underdeveloped countries are transformed into major powers by the cross-border factor flows that characterise an integrated global economy, and this process is

¹ Arguments to the effect that nothing fundamental has changed remain more prevalent in North American IR scholarship. See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” International Security 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000).
likely to continue apace over the coming decades. The return of global multipolarity and the
competition incentives that this will bring may, in turn, have profound consequences for
Western states’ freedom to engage in liberal intervention of the kind that characterised the
1990s and 2000s.

The paper proceeds in six parts. First, it outlines a theoretical argument that utilises
concepts from both economics and IR to explain why an era of deep economic integration –
such as the early twenty-first century – can drive a rapid shift in the balance of power
between countries, and why that shift in the balance of power is likely to generate conflict
incentives. Second, it discusses a historical case – the 1870–1914 period – that amply
demonstrates this economic integration–power convergence–international conflict pathway in
action, and that bears many instructive similarities to the contemporary situation. Third, it
turns to consider the current era of economic integration, which began before the end of the
Cold War but which gathered pace from the late 1990s and through the 2000s, before looking
forward to some forecasts of the likely direction of travel throughout the rest of the first half
of this century.

Fourth, it analyses the possible impact of a return of multipolar great power
competition at the global level on the strategic environment faced by Western states –
particularly European states, and most notably the United Kingdom. It argues that while there
are key causes for optimism about the prospects for continuing peace among Western states,
there are five reasons that renewed great power competition at the global level could
negatively impact on Euro-Atlantic powers. These are: the resurgence of Russia; a reduced
US commitment to European defence; an elevated risk of international military crises with
the ability to embroil Western states, via their strategic or commercial interests; the elevated
incentives for nuclear proliferation; and the ensuing threat to Western sea lines of
communication and critical supply chains. Fifth, it discusses the likely impact of such factors
on Western grand strategic behaviour, arguing that the structural pressures now being manifested point towards a reduced commitment to humanitarian intervention. It concludes that while there are good reasons to believe that intra-Western relations will remain broadly cooperative going forward, Euro-Atlantic states’ relations with other major powers are already becoming more competitive, and a likely consequence of this will be a reduced commitment to liberal interventionism and a return to a more restrained grand strategy.

The Theory: Economic Integration, Shifting Balances, and Major Power Competition

This section of the paper explains the connection between economic openness, power shifts and international conflict via a generalizable conceptual framework that draws together the relevant strands of economic theory and IR theory. When the world moves towards greater economic openness (that is, when integration deepens), three processes are expanded: international trade in goods and services, cross-border financial flows, and international technology diffusion. Today, this is a process that we call economic globalization. Each of these mechanisms can cause the national economic output of follower economies – states that are not amongst the most technologically-advanced economies of the day – to grow faster than such lead economies. In the short to medium term, this can come about because the profits from trade and an influx of international finance boost the national capital stock, which is essential to maximising the level of output that can be generated from a given national pool of labour and other factors of production. In the longer term, all three mechanisms – trade, investment, and technology diffusion – can improve the national technological base, thereby boosting total factor productivity. Technological progress is the

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3 For the underlying broad principles, see Nicholas F. R. Crafts, "Globalization and Economic Growth in the Twentieth Century," IMF Working Paper WP-00-44(March 2000); Grzegorz W. Kolodko, "Globalization and
key determinant of long-run growth in all mainstream variants of economic growth theory: there is disagreement over whether such progress should be treated as exogenously-determined or as an endogenous component of the model, but not over whether technological progress is a key cause of growth. \(^4\) ‘Technology’ in this context does not mean simply the physical aspects of technology, but rather the progress in human technology – that is, the development of skills and knowledge – that underlies improved productivity.

Why would these mechanisms differentially favour follower economies, resulting in these states’ total national economic output catching-up with that of the leading states in the system? The simple answer is that copying is almost invariably cheaper, faster, and easier than innovating. Technological lead economies bear the cost and time burden of invention and innovation; for the advanced economies to grow, they must drive technological progress themselves. Follower economies, meanwhile, bear a much smaller share of the innovation burden, provided that the world economy is integrated. High levels of trade, cross-border finance and international technology and knowledge sharing allow follower economies to quickly and cheaply absorb the skills and capabilities necessary to make rapid strides in productivity, thereby resulting in more rapid economic growth than in the leading economies. Indeed, such mechanisms could facilitate catch-up growth even if technological innovation

was ‘free’, since there would still be scope for follower economies to absorb the innovations that the leading economies were already using. By contrast, if the world economy is less integrated, there is less trade, cross-border investment and technology sharing, and therefore less opportunity for follower economies’ growth to outstrip that of the lead economies sufficiently for economic catch-up to take place.

The implications of this process for the balance of power are not hard to discern. If international economic integration has the potential to cause follower economies to grow at a rate that substantially outstrips that of lead economies, then those emerging states’ total national economic output can converge on that of the developed states. If these rising states also happen to have large populations, then the result is that their economies can become amongst the largest in the international system. Since aggregate national wealth is the fungible resource that underpins national power, including the ability to procure military forces – which remain the ultima ratio of the anarchic international system – this is akin to saying that international economic integration (globalization) can create great powers. Here, great powers are defined as states with the latent underlying economic wherewithal to generate sufficient military force to put up a good fight in an all-out defensive war against any other state in the international system, given at least a modest military build-up period. Great powers must also possess the concomitant ability to pose an offensive military threat to at least one other state meeting this same criterion, since without such ability, they cannot be of consequence to the balance of power.

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5 This focus on underlying latent power resources differs from approaches that focus predominantly on current levels of realised military power: John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York, USA: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001). Mearsheimer’s definition is less appropriate when considering both how the long-term power position of states evolves, and the related matter of how rising or declining states will pay at least as much attention to their rivals’ levels of underlying wherewithal when considering the severity of the long-term security threat they pose. For example, on this metric, contemporary Japan is an Asian major power – and its neighbours will view it as such – despite its current low levels of defence spending (in proportional terms) and pacifistic constitution, since its aggregate national wealth and technological sophistication would allow it to rapidly develop much more capable military forces if it chose to.
Such a finding yields significant insights into the causes of major power competition. Realist theories of international conflict derive their predictions for the war-proneness of the international system from assessment of the relative stability of different international power configurations. In particular, while uni- and bipolarity – systems of only one or two great powers – are widely seen as quite peaceful (at least at the great power level), multipolarity – at least when it becomes unbalanced in favour of one particular major state – is often argued to be more war-prone.\(^6\) This is because there are more potential great power conflict dyads under multipolarity, there is greater likelihood of significant power inequality under multipolarity, and most importantly, there is greater uncertainty over which states will balance against an emergent threat under multipolarity, due to all sides’ incentive to pass the buck.\(^7\) Insofar as international economic integration can create great powers, this means that it will also shift the international system towards a more war-prone polarity configuration – at least in situations when at least some of the follower economies have populations that are as large or larger than those of at least some of the incumbent leading economies.\(^8\)

\(^6\) Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, USA: Random House, 1979), 161-63, 70-76; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*: 44-45. Note, however, that the conclusion that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity is not universally accepted: Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* 16, no. 3 (April 1964). Moreover, the argument that balanced multipolarity could be relatively stable is logically attractive, as any one power that tried to ‘run the tables’ could be balanced by one of the others regardless of whether buck-passing occurred, provided that none of the third parties engaged in bandwagoning with the aggressor as a route to post-war gains. The crucial point therefore seems to be the instability of *unbalanced* multipolarity, and the fact that some degree of imbalance is more likely than ‘perfectly’ balanced multipolarity.


\(^8\) Note here that it is perfectly possible to posit scenarios where such economic shifts create a *less* war-prone polarity configuration. For example, if none of the follower economies have large enough economies to catch-up in aggregate terms even as their per capita development levels converge on those of the leading economies, then no polarity shift will occur. Conversely, of course, if all of the leading economies were so small in population terms that their total GDP was already lower than that of the follower economies, the latter’s per capita catch-up growth would simply see them widen their overall GDP lead, again meaning that no polarity shift would occur. Crucially, however, it seems likely that there will be large countries in population terms amongst both the leaders and followers at any one time – and this is borne-out empirically – meaning that a polarity shift seems a likely outcome of the convergence process. If that shift is from uni- to bipolarity, the system may not become more war-prone – but where the shift is from uni- or bipolarity to multipolarity (particularly of the unbalanced kind), as seems likely in an epoch of integration-dispersed economic dynamism, the result could well be increased war-proneness.
Moreover – and just as crucially for this argument’s purposes – economic integration can generate dynamic power differentials between the major states. Such power differentials can in turn be a potent cause of dyadic security dilemmas. The economic catch-up process causes dynamic differentials in power growth between the major states: a necessary corollary to the relative rise of some powers is that others will be in relative decline. These dynamic power differentials generate sound strategic reasons for both types of state to fear the other. Declining states will know that as time passes, their ability to safeguard their vital interests against the possible predations of rising powers will wane, giving them incentives to retard the rise of the ascendant states while they still have the advantage. This would necessitate either some variant of containment – economic and/or military – or, at the extreme, preventive war; either way, however, the declining power’s strategy will impinge on the rising power’s vital interest. For their part, rising powers will be aware of this incentive structure facing declining powers, and also be aware that the best way to protect their own vital interests is to remove the ability of declining powers to threaten them as soon as possible.

This dyadic process can thus generate an acute security dilemma: both rising and declining states may have no intrinsic reason to want to harm the other, except for the fact that their desire to be secure against the other in the presence of relative power shifts gives the other good reason to fear them, and vice versa. Moreover, where these power shifts are both rapid (in speed terms) and large (in size terms) – as is certainly possible in a situation of differential economic dynamism – this security dilemma is likely to be particularly severe.

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11 Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*: 15. ‘Rapid’ is used as a qualifying adjective frequently in this paper; it is therefore important to note here that rapidity of the power shifts is not a necessary condition for the mechanisms to operate as described, but it does seem likely to magnify and accelerate the overall effect.
In short, economic integration-driven power shifts have the potential to both elevate overall systemic war-proneness (by increasing polarity) and generate severe aggression incentives at the dyadic level (via the security dilemma produced by dynamic differentials).\textsuperscript{12}

Of course, the mere possession of latent economic capability does not force a state to spend a lot on defence or act like a ‘normal’ great power, meaning that underlying industrial wherewithal in itself does not cause security competition. Yet a state that does not have wealth cannot be a great power: economic capability underpins the broader ability of all states to accomplish their goals.\textsuperscript{13} More importantly for this paper’s causal story, a state with the economic prerequisites will also struggle to avoid acting as a great power indefinitely, not least because other states will treat it as being one. A state with considerable latent capability is more likely to be guarded against because of its military potential, and states that are guarded against are themselves likely to feel threatened, fuelling a feed-back relationship of mutual suspicion and thus exacerbating the security dilemma. Accordingly, the crucial aspect of national power in this paper remains underlying military-industrial potential; it is true that domestic political factors determine specific spending priorities, but insofar as a state’s underlying potential determines the long-term threat that it may ultimately pose, it seems plausible to suppose that it figures heavily in other states’ strategic calculus.

The combination of economic theory and IR theory discussed above is summarised in figure 1. The independent variable (IV) – economic integration – drives a shift in the relative balance of power, as it enables less-developed economies to grow faster than leading economies. This shift in the balance of power can in turn give all major states good reason to fear one another: some will be rising, others declining in relative terms, and the incentive structure faced by each group can give them reason to want to weaken the other, resulting in security competition (the dependent variable (DV)).

\textsuperscript{12} On the security dilemma as a concept, see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," World Politics 30, no. 2 (January 1978).
\textsuperscript{13} Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics: 62.
IV: International Economic Integration (aka. Globalization) Occurs

Follower Economies Grow Faster than Leading Economies

Balance of Power Changes

Security Dilemma Generated

DV: Probability of Major Power Conflict Increases

Last Time: Economic Openness and Power Shifts, 1870–1914

The previous section explained why economic openness results in rapid shifts in the balance of power, and why those shifts in the balance of power should give cause for concern, due to the conflict incentives that they create. This section progresses to briefly consider evidence from the years 1870 to 1914, a period that economic historians routinely refer to as the ‘first wave’ of globalization. This period represents a key historical case that shows this theoretical pathway in action, and therefore contains significant lessons for today.

An extensive treatment of the 1870–1914 case lies beyond the scope of this brief paper. What this section does set-out to do, however, is to briefly demonstrate congruence between the answers to four empirical questions. First, did economic integration deepen in

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14 David S. Jacks, Christopher M. Meissner, and Dennis Novy, "Trade costs in the first wave of globalization," *Explorations in Economic History* 47, no. 2 (April 2010).

15 For a detailed elaboration of this case that process-traces the economic and strategic interactions at work, see Blagden, "International Commerce, Power Convergence, and Conflict Incentives: Why Economic Integration Can Cause Major Power War."
the period between 1870 and 1914? Second, was there economic catch-up convergence in this period? Third, did the balance of power shift in this period? And fourth, did shifts in the balance of power during this period exacerbate major power security competition and thus make conflict more likely? Of course, a demonstration of correlation does not prove causation – but in light of the theoretical story told above, and given the more comprehensive empirical assessment that I have presented elsewhere, the congruence test can at least prove indicative.

**Figure 2. World Economic Openness, 1880-1914**

First, let us consider the claim that 1870–1914 represented a period of deepening international economic integration. Figure 2 suggests that such deepening integration was indeed happening, and on a dramatic scale. The global ratio of trade to GDP did not return to
comparable levels until the 1970s – an all the more impressive statistic when freight transport innovations that characterised the 1914–1970 period are considered, such as the intermodal shipping container. Meanwhile, financial integration and labour mobility had not returned to their 1880–1913 highs as of the late 1990s (1870–79 was unfortunately not included in this data series). In short, it seems safe to say that the independent variable in this paper’s causal story was indeed pointing in the correct direction.

Figure 3. Labour Productivity Catch-Up Growth in the Major Economies

![Figure 3. Labour Productivity Catch-Up Growth in the Major Economies](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/the-world-economy_9789264022621-en)


Second, let us consider whether international economic integration correlated with catch-up convergence growth by follower economies towards the position of leading economies. In accordance with its position as the most advanced industrial leader, the United Kingdom was the most productive economy in the world in 1870, producing $2.55 (in 1990

dollar terms) of GDP for every hour worked. It was followed by the United States, at $2.25/hour, and was more than half as productive again than Germany ($1.55/hour). Yet over the 43-year period to 1913, UK labour productivity grew by the smallest amount out of any major power, as figure 3 makes clear. The next lowest – Germany – still experienced growth of nearly 30 percent more than Britain, while the United States and Japan both posted particularly impressive figures, of 128 and 135 percent respectively. The result was that by the eve of World War I, the labour productivity of all of the major powers had converged towards that of the United Kingdom – and indeed, US labour productivity had surpassed that of the former industrial leader. Such a pattern is entirely consistent with the catch-up convergence processes described above, insofar as improvements to the capital stock and national technological base of follower economies – which are in turn facilitated by the free flow of goods, finance and skills – raise the output of each individual worker.

The impact of these shifts in the balance of economic output on the balance of latent military power is not hard to discern. Figure 4 provides a sense of the overall dynamic, by charting the Correlates of War (CoW) programme’s composite index of national capability (CINC) for the United Kingdom, United States, Germany, France, Russia, Japan, Italy and Austria-Hungary. The CoW composite index combines population data (both total and urbanised), industrialisation metrics (bulk metal output and energy usage), and military power data (military personnel numbers and total defence spending). It is clearly only an imperfect proxy for precise levels of national capability to fulfil specific strategic tasks, and must thus be used with care; nonetheless, the overall direction of travel is clear. The United

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Kingdom was replaced as the world’s foremost great power by the United States in the late 1890s, while Germany emerged as Europe’s most capable power around the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century. Russia also became an increasingly capable state – it was on an upwards trajectory, though not as capable as Germany – while France fell out of the top-tier of great powers. Austria-Hungary and Italy essentially flat-lined at the bottom of the major power club, while Japan posted noteworthy gains but suffered from its negligible starting position. All of this is entirely consistent with the theoretical story told above.

Figure 4. Trajectories in the Major Powers’ Latent Military-Industrial Potential

![Graph showing the CoW Composite Index of National Capability from 1870 to 1910 for various countries.]


It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore precisely how this shift in military-industrial power potential was manifested in defence spending, military personnel numbers, military capital intensity (that is, spending divided by personnel), warship tonnage, and so
forth. It is also beyond the scope of this paper to give a comprehensive account of how shifts in the balance of power generated a security dilemma in Europe in 1914. Fortunately, however, the paper does not need to provide such an account, since that has been a singularly popular task with military historians and IR theorists since 1914 itself. Suffice it to say, however, that as Hew Strachan notes in his seminal history of the origins of World War I, the central problem for the stability of European great power relations after German unification was that, ‘Germany’s position in Europe after 1871 was at once threatening and vulnerable – threatening because central Europe was now dominated by a major power, casting shadows over Russia to the east and France to the west, and vulnerable because the new state had long, exposed land frontiers in the same directions.’\(^1\) This is security dilemma logic in action. As such, once 43 subsequent years of integration-driven catch-up growth had left Germany as Europe’s most capable great power, it is easy to understand how a major conflagration came to be likely.

**This Time: Economic Openness and Power Shifts, 1980–2024**

The evidence above demonstrates that in a crucial historical case, the power shifts brought about by economic integration resulted in international conflict. This is a lesson that should resonate today. In this section, I progress to consider the present-day context. I have roughly categorised this as the period from 1980 to 2024, to take into account the beginnings of economic opening in China and financial liberalisation in the West – and also to allocate the same 44-year timeframe to the contemporary case as to the historical one. That said, it should be emphasised that the pace of change described here escalated from the late 1990s, meaning that this case can be thought of largely in terms of reflecting on what the economic

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trajectories of the first decade of the twenty-first century mean for the strategic environment of the coming years.

International economic openness began to deepen again, following the shocks of the 1970s, from the early 1980s onwards. Moreover, on most metrics, economic globalization attained unprecedented depths during the first decade of the twenty-first century. And the years since 2000 have seen several key emerging markets – including Brazil, Russia, India, and most of all China (the so-called BRICs) – sustain average economic growth that far outstrips that of the G6 advanced industrial powers (the United States, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, France and Italy). Insofar as such catch-up convergence growth is a product of the capital formation and technological diffusion that has in turn flowed from the trade, financial flows, and cross-border knowledge transfers inherent to the globalization of the world economy, this outcome is entirely consistent with the theory.

Figure 5. Forecast Nominal GDP of the Major Powers in 2050

![Chart showing forecast nominal GDP of major powers in 2050](chart.png)


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For an early exploration of this empirical case in light of the theory presented, see David W. Blagden, "Globalization, Convergence, and the Balance of Power" (paper presented at the Program on International Politics, Economics and Security (PIPES), University of Chicago, IL, USA, May 29 2008).
What do these growth trajectories mean in balance-of-power terms looking forward into the twenty-first century? Figure 5 provides a clue. The Goldman Sachs ‘BRICs’ project is now widely recognised (the figures presented here represent the 2008 updates of their original 2003 forecasts), and all such projections must be used with extreme caution; after all, domestic upheaval in China, for example, could change entire the global economic system, let alone the Chinese growth forecast. Nonetheless, such projections do give at least some sense of the underlying direction of travel. And as this chart makes clear, the economic direction of travel begun in the first decade of the twenty-first century – if sustained going forward – will result in a markedly changed balance of power by the middle of the century. The likelihood is a multipolar system of three top-tier great powers – China, the United States, and India – within a ten-major-power system. Moreover, this overall polarity transition would be accompanied by a number of significant dynamic differentials. In East Asia, China pulling away from Japan to become the preponderant power in the region would be a major development, as would Russia returning to position of being substantially more powerful than Germany in Europe. And at the global level, China overtaking the United States to become the world’s largest economy (which Goldman Sachs project for 2027) is likely to have a considerable impact on the international system.

As a historical case study, the contemporary era of economic globalization has not ‘ended’ yet – so we cannot say for sure what the ramifications of the economic integration-induced power shifts that are underway will be for international conflict dynamics.

Nonetheless, in light of the theoretical argument laid out above coupled to the empirical

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evidence from a prior case in which economic integration drove a shift in the balance of power that subsequently resulted in major power conflict, it is fair to say that the contemporary case contains the potential for major power conflict.\textsuperscript{23} This general conclusion is further borne-out in the specific context by evidence of the beginnings of US balancing behaviour towards a rising China.\textsuperscript{24}

The Western Strategic Environment in a Multipolar Global Era

One striking difference between the historical case and the contemporary case in this paper provides the principal basis for optimism about the Western strategic environment and Euro-Atlantic states’ national security outlook in the coming years. The 1870–1914 period witnessed a major shift in the balance of power between the Western European great powers – a group of countries that also contained virulent nationalistic streaks, a militarised decision-making class, and which between them represented the dominant epicentre of world politics.\textsuperscript{25} By contrast, Western European states have today achieved a striking degree of institutional enmeshment and normative embeddedness. Moreover, while it is hard to know precisely how much causal impact these institutional and normative factors have, peace within Western Europe is further bolstered by an array of strategic factors. These include approximate power parity between the region’s three states with the underlying military-industrial wherewithal to generate non-trivial offensive capability (Germany, France, and the

\textsuperscript{23} For an elaboration of this argument, see David W. Blagden, "Strategic Thinking for the Age of Austerity," \textit{RUSI Journal} 154, no. 6 (December 2009).
\textsuperscript{24} See, for example, Michael Pillsbury, "China and Taiwan: The American Debate," \textit{RUSI Journal} 154, no. 2 (April 2009).
\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, it is worth noting that despite the meteoric rise of the United States in aggregate capability terms by the eve of World War I, the US share of global aggregate capability still only stood at 22 percent in 1913, compared to the European major powers’ 52 percent (the combined share of the United Kingdom, France, Russia, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy): \textit{Correlates of War: National Material Capabilities}, Version 4.0. Data accessed on 15 February 2011 at http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/Capabilities/NMC_v4_0.csv. For guidance on the composition and reliability of the Index, see the accompanying Version 4.0 Codebook, accessed on 15 February 2011 at http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/Capabilities/NMC_Codebook_v4_0.pdf. For citation, see: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey, "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820-1965."; Singer, "Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States, 1816-1985."
United Kingdom), the US commitment to Europe via the NATO alliance system, the likelihood of enduring alliance to balance perceived external threats, and the French and British nuclear arsenals. Finally, of course, the very fact of Europe’s reduced strategic salience in contemporary international politics is itself part of the blessing. Those who are inclined to lament European powers’ diminished role in the world should reflect that this is as much – or even more – a product of now predominantly cooperative relations as it is some function of reduced material capability. Indeed, if the rest of the world’s major powers are locked in strategic competition with little regard for Europe as anything other than a commercial partner, this could suit European economic and political interests very well.

With this all said, however, the fact of generally cooperative relations within Western Europe is unlikely to be able to wholly insulate European (and North American) states from the security implications of multipolar great power competition in the rest of the world. There are five principal reasons for this. First, and most critical of all, is the resurgence of Russia. Goldman Sachs projects that Russian GDP will surpass French GDP in 2024, UK GDP in 2027, and German GDP in 2029. By 2050, they expect Russia to be half as big again compared to Germany. To be sure, the Russian economy faces profound structural challenges: embedded corruption and weak property rights, dependence on the hydrocarbon sector, and demographic decline will all act as an impediment to growth unless addressed. Nonetheless, Russia’s catch-up convergence potential is considerable – and given its size in population terms, a Russia with GDP per capita approaching that of Germany (or even the Czech Republic) would once again have a marked lead in terms of European military-industrial potential.

Besides the abstract power potential argument, there are compelling reasons to believe that Russia could once again become a European security concern. In March 2009, Russian

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President Dmitry Medvedev announced a $140 billion rearmament and military professionalisation programme, which will focus on qualitative improvements and deployability.\textsuperscript{27} Other professed objectives include a fleet of six new aircraft carriers, new submarines, and the fifth-generation fighter plane currently in advanced development – not bad things in themselves, but such a capability set would unambiguously restore Russia to a position of European military preponderance that it has not enjoyed since 1989. Moreover, the 2007 cyber attack on Estonia, the 2008 incursion into Georgia, and the 2009 military exercises that simulated an invasion of the Baltic states and a nuclear strike on Warsaw\textsuperscript{28} all demonstrate a continuing Russian willingness to use military force to achieve political goals within Europe, while such moves as resuming Arctic naval patrols and resuming long-range bomber patrols (that routinely approach NATO airspace) demonstrate a general regional assertiveness. Finally, Moscow’s leveraging of nationalism for political legitimation purposes creates the risk of domestic pressures for bellicosity that are no longer as marked as they once were in Western Europe.

None of this is listed to accuse Russia of malign intentions towards Western Europe (although it does not preclude such intentions, either); a country of its size, history, and shortage of major allies is likely to see such a capability set as simply prudent, regardless of intentions. However, since no state can ever know for sure what another will do with its military-industrial wherewithal, it makes sense to pay close attention to others’ capabilities.\textsuperscript{29} And while the Estonia and Georgia cases stand-out by suggesting that cyber attacks are likely to play a role in any future Russian coercive measures that Moscow may choose, and thus certainly need to be understood and prepared for, it would be wrong to assume that cyber is

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{27} See “Russia announces rearmament plan”, \textit{BBC News Online}, 17 March 2009; accessed 18 October 2009 at \url{http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7947824.stm}. Whether this particular programme is actually fulfilled is less significant than the rationale and motivations behind it.
\bibitem{28} See “Russia and NATO: Rethink the Reset”, The Economist, 19 May 2012; accessed 22 May 2012 at \url{http://www.economist.com/node/21555580}.
\bibitem{29} Mearsheimer, \textit{The Tragedy of Great Power Politics}: 31.
\end{thebibliography}
the only form of coercion that could potentially be deployed and that therefore needs to be guarded against. After all, cyber attacks still ultimately sit below various conventional and nuclear kinetic options in the conflict escalation spectrum, and were only one early facet of the August 2008 campaign.

The second reason that a more competitive multipolar global security environment is likely to impact on the European strategic environment is that the US military commitment to European defence is likely to be hollowed-out to the point where it exists in treaty form but does not feature heavily in US strategic calculations or – crucially – force disposition. Alliances form for a reason – usually, because they are needed to balance an external threat – meaning that the rationale for their existence disappears along with that threat.30 Given the free-riding incentives that alliances create for weaker allies, the strongest ally’s costly commitment to their partners is bound to be questioned domestically once the principal benefits that that strongest member received from the alliance are no longer present.31 For the United States, the commitment to European defence during the Cold War was unshakeable principally as a direct consequence of the continent’s role as a centre of industrial power. Had the Soviet Union come to dominate the whole Eurasian landmass, the balance of power would have shifted decisively against the United States. Yet today, containing China and generally handling the rest of the world is a higher strategic priority for the United States than is balancing Russia, and the United States itself faces a future in which it is but one member of the great power top-tier rather than a sole preponderant superpower. China has far greater power potential than Russia, and given that the world as a whole will be one in which the Americans find it harder to deal with rivals and safeguard their interests, the US will likely

prove increasingly unwilling – and eventually unable – to shoulder the European defence burden.\textsuperscript{32}

Signs of this already abound. US forces withdrawn from Europe for deployment to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are unlikely to return once those commitments are wound down, and as recently as 10 June 2011, the outgoing US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates – in a frank rebuke to his European counterparts – described the current situation of European free-riding on the United States within NATO as “unsustainable.”\textsuperscript{33} The result is that European states are likely to soon find themselves forced to carry more of their own defence burden than has been the case since 1945. Of course, this is not to suggest that longstanding alliances are suddenly set to fracture altogether – but it does suggest that European states will have to start hedging against threats based on their true strategic importance, as opposed to their political convenience. And tying back to the first point listed above, the likelihood of having to shoulder more of their own defence burden is why containing Russia could prove harder for European states in the twenty-first century than it was in the Cold War, despite Russia actually remaining much weaker vis-à-vis the United States than it was for much of the twentieth century. Finally, while relations within Western Europe are today institutionally and normatively embedded, this embeddedness developed under – and has never existed without – the US security umbrella. As such, intra-European relations could come under increasing strain in a situation where the continent’s major powers had to provide more for their own security (for example, if a resurgence of Russia coupled to a reduced US commitment resulted in Germany acquiring more autonomous capabilities).


Third, a multipolar world of elevated great power security competition is likely to be one with considerable potential for military crises. Such crises could, in turn, embroil European states – either because their vital interests are affected, or even inadvertently. The European periphery has considerable potential for military crises on the borders of NATO, as the events of August 2008 demonstrated, and any such crisis on Europe’s borders will be a pressing security concern for European states. Likewise, the Middle East will likely remain a focal point of security competition, given its economic importance to the United States, China and India, along with the presence of several militarily-capable regional powers with starkly divergent interests, such as Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and post-revolutionary Egypt. Given the Middle East’s economic significance to European powers also, and its proximity to the European periphery, the likelihood of embroilment in a future conflict there – either through accident or design – is non-trivial. There is also the risk of involvement in military crises even further afield, particularly where key commercial or strategic interests are at stake. France’s stake in Africa could increasingly be encroached upon as other great powers may more attention to that continent, for instance, while threats to UK interests in the South Atlantic will only increase as Latin American development proceeds apace and if the waters around the Falkland Islands turn out to contain commercially-viable seabed mineral deposits. Ultimately, however, the point of this paragraph is not to descend into an exercise in laundry-listing hypothetical conflict scenarios. Rather, the salient point is that in a world of general great power tension, the likelihood of militarised crises involving major powers will increase – and the very fact that predicting the future of international conflict is a business with such a poor track record suggests that European grand strategy should at least partially hedge against embroilment in such as-yet-unforeseen crises.

The fourth reason that a multipolar global environment of competing great powers may impact on the European strategic environment is that it will increase the incentives to
acquire nuclear weapons for deterrent – and potentially also coercive – purposes. There are excellent reasons to suppose that nuclear weapons are defence-favourable and make interstate conflict between their possessors less likely. However, there can also be little doubt that the likelihood of accidental, inadvertent, or miscalculated nuclear use also rises as the number of nuclear powers increases, particularly in states with weak administrative capacity and political systems with the potential to be dominated by non-representative militarist factions. A world of multiple competing great powers is likely to be one in which many states feel vulnerable, and one of the best safeguards against coercion by the conventionally-strong is a nuclear arsenal. Likewise, in a world where major power security competition is elevated, states are more likely to feel that they require a means of coercion to promote their interests – and nuclear threats are a potent form of coercion, either in their own right or as cover for conventional military threats or actions. That being the case, the coming years contain at least the potential for proliferation to continue in the same vein that it did in the first decade of the twenty-first century, which could have negative consequences for the Western strategic environment.

Note also as a corollary to this point that these same incentives to acquire coercive capability are also likely to drive a larger number of states to generate more potent cyber offensive capabilities. It probably makes sense to consider such cyber threats within an overarching existing framework of strategic effect; a framework still topped by nuclear weapons in terms of sheer destructive potential. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that

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disruptive – and potentially debilitating – cyber attacks are likely to play a key role in future conflicts and the overall coercive spectrum.\textsuperscript{37}

The fifth and final reason that a multipolar international system at the global level could impact on the Western strategic environment connects to the point made above about potential embroilment in military crises elsewhere in the world. Namely, such negative strategic impact could occur as a result of security competition elsewhere in the world impacting on European states’ sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and associated critical supply chains (for food, raw materials, energy, industrial inputs, and so forth). Europe relies heavily on uninterrupted flows of imports and exports, mainly via the sea, for its economic wellbeing and strategic viability. European energy supplies rely heavily on shipments from the Middle East and pipelines from Russia – both identified above as potential sources of diplomatic and strategic tension with European states. Meanwhile, an array of potential arenas of maritime great power contestation can be identified, all of which are of key strategic or commercial significance to one or more European states. The Indian Ocean, Persian and Arabian Gulfs, and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca are all of crucial importance to European seagoing commerce, and subsequently the very fabric of European economies – yet European states’ naval capability to provide any measure of independent (non-US) security to such SLOCs is now seriously hollowed-out. Meanwhile, the South Atlantic will remain an important maritime theatre for the United Kingdom for as long as London sustains its current resolve on the Falklands, and all Western European states should pause for thought on Russia’s increasing maritime assertiveness in the Northeast Atlantic – the single most crucial SLOC for European powers, from both a commercial and a strategic perspective.

\textsuperscript{37} Paul Cornish et al., \textit{On Cyber Warfare} (London, UK: Chatham House, November 2010).
Major Power Competition and the Eschewal of Intervention

Major power competition is already returning to the international system, and this will have significant implications for the European strategic environment. This process was underway in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and is set to continue apace in the coming years. Such an understanding should, in turn, be reflected in the grand strategic posture and defence procurement choices of the United Kingdom and its European allies. In particular, the argument that European powers should abandon balanced capability sets that include options for high-intensity state-on-state conflict in favour of concentrating on counterinsurgency or humanitarian reconstruction missions (say) because their international influence has declined is not a coherent position. The same goes for arguments that play down hard power altogether, in a bid to recoup influence by becoming some sort of normative ‘soft superpower’. Such reasoning amounts to an argument that “there will be more major powers in the world, therefore we should abandon major war-fighting capability” – it does not make sense when probed at its foundations.

As noted above, my analysis carries broad implications Western grand strategy in general – and particularly for the strategic postures of the other major European powers, France and Germany. That said, there are specific conclusions that follow from the above assessment for the United Kingdom, which is unique in certain respects. First, it has been Europe’s most activist military power in the past decade – meaning that it represents a good ‘test case’ for the results of the interventionist approach. Second, the costs of this very activism have drastically reduced the number and scale of defensive tasks that the United Kingdom is still independently capable of, thus weakening its overall strategic position – meaning that Britain is a salutary case for the perils of liberal interventionism (particularly of the inadequately-funded variety). Third, it is an island – an insular power, in grand strategy

38 Blagden, “Strategic Thinking for the Age of Austerity,” 62-64.
39 Ibid., 63.
parlance – meaning that it faces certain strategic opportunities that are not open to continental powers (states that share their landmass with at least one other major power).

The key lesson from the elapsed first decade of this century – and a logical extension of the theoretical analysis presented above – is that in a situation of increasing great power security competition and decline in a country’s underlying military-industrial capabilities relative to those of rising powers, the most sensible thing that that country can do is conserve rather than squandering its strength. Generating a balanced set of capabilities that allow the country in question to deter – and if necessary respond to – potential high-intensity future threats from other militarily-capable major powers should be a priority, since such hedging capability is far more important to national security than prevailing in ‘luxury’ wars of choice. The best way to preserve the resources required to generate such balanced capability is to avoid military intervention in all cases except those in which a failure to intervene will lead to an adverse and decisive impact on the balance of power that leads to increased vulnerability in the future.40 Indeed, returning to the 1870-1914 case studied earlier, it is worth noting that while the British and French imperial projects in the mid-nineteenth century were characterised by a forceful liberal agenda of moral imposition, ‘civilisational’ tasks, and ambitious efforts to affect change in the domestic cultures and political systems of colonised regions, the relative rise of competitor great powers by the end of the nineteenth century had engendered a more cautious, realpolitik approach to Western empire-building.41

Such a ‘hands-off’ approach to direct intervention in other countries’ domestic affairs also means that a state creates fewer enemies, both conventional (states) and unconventional

40 This does not preclude all humanitarian interventions – those where the strategic cost was zero (or close to) could still be countenanced, especially given the moral case and domestic political pressure. Hence, there would be no strategic case against intervening in a civil war that involved genocide mainly conducted with machetes (say), if the killing could be readily prevented or stopped by even a small number of well-armed troops at no risk of getting dragged into war-fighting against an adequately armed enemy. However, this maxim does preclude any intervention where adequately armed and organised resistance could possibly be met that would impose non-trivial strategic costs on the intervener.

41 On the liberal agenda of mid-nineteenth century European empires, see Jennifer Pitts, A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France (Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2006).
(insurgents and terrorists). Terrorism, in particular, is broadly recognised as a specific strategic response by weak actors to adverse political conditions – most notably, foreign occupation (or perceived foreign occupation) of either the terrorist’s homeland or occasionally another territory of special significance to them.\footnote{Robert A. Pape, “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” American Political Science Review 97, no. 3 (August 2003).} Meanwhile, it is an expression of the obvious that a foreign state cannot find itself fighting an enemy insurgency if it is not conducting an occupation for the insurgents to fight against.

For a major-but-limited power – a state of consequence to the balance of power in a strategically-vital region of the world that also retains a degree of non-trivial capability to support out-of-region interests, but that does not have the resource base to match the true top-tier great power(s) at the global level – this power-conservation challenge is especially pressing. This is because it is only through an astute, shrewd, and prudent use of available resources that such major-but-limited powers can retain the ability to independently safeguard their vital interests. In short, the prescription should be to walk softly whilst carrying a big stick: the diametrical opposite, on both counts, of what the United Kingdom has been doing since 2001. The same logic applies to France, Germany, and even the United States – the latter has a much larger military-industrial resource base, to be sure, but it also faces a much wider array of large-scale global strategic commitments.

What, then, would be an appropriate overarching framework for a twenty-first century UK grand strategy that seeks to conserve national power for the tasks ahead where it will really matter, and that makes full use of Britain’s natural advantages? A neat label for the strategic posture implied above is what US strategic theorists have tended to dub ‘offshore balancing’.\footnote{On the overarching theory of offshore balancing, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," International Security 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996-7). For further development of the theory and an examination of the United Kingdom’s suitability for and historical success with such a grand strategy, see Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics: 234-66. In the UK context, Michael Codner} Offshore balancers eschew ground commitments in all cases except those where
a shift in the balance of power on an overseas continent would be so drastic as to leave the offshore balancer incapable of protecting its vital interests without intervention. If they intervene ashore, they do it as quickly as possible, from the sea, and seek only to restore a local balance of power that enables them to leave. They do not attempt the conquest of states with either symmetrical or asymmetrical capability to impose substantial costs on them, except in cases of first-order strategic significance (that is, an existential threat that will grow unacceptably unless dealt with via direct intervention), and they do not attempt comprehensive state-building operations. Such a posture is thus not compatible with the liberal interventionism that has characterised UK grand strategy since the start of the twenty-first century, which has done more harm than good – certainly to our strategic position, and quite possibly also to those who have been on the receiving end of our professed good intentions.\textsuperscript{44} Again, the same logic can be applied to the United States, and to a lesser extent France and Germany (although the latter two do not benefit from insularity).

Note that acting as an offshore balancer does not imply a diminished ability to exert the influence necessary to safeguard vital interests. On the contrary, it is the best route to conserving the very capability that underpins national power. A state with substantial capability that is not embroiled in intractable direct interventions has far more deterrent and coercive potential in the eyes of potential foes than one that has weakened its overall capability through overuse and that has no spare capacity as a consequence of being locked in intractable and unnecessary conflicts. It seems to be a particular trait of the Western defence debates, particularly in the United Kingdom, that the only way to justify possession of a

\textsuperscript{44} Of course, the final balance sheet on this front will depend in part on whether Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya all emerge in the long run as stable and peaceful liberal democracies capable of protecting their people from internal injustice and external threats – but as things presently stand, it is by no means clear cut that the humanitarian impact of these three interventions has been a net positive.
capability is through its vigorous usage in discretionary operations – usage that, due to its cost, actually jeopardises the overall national capability set – whereas the most sensible policy is to possess the capability but refrain from using it unless absolutely necessary.

There are obviously certain geographical prerequisites to acting as an offshore balancer; it is not a grand strategy that Switzerland is likely to adopt anytime soon. Continental powers must inevitably pay more attention to continental security concerns, meaning that only insular powers – such as the United Kingdom and United States – are fortunate enough to be able to act as true offshore balancers. Ultimately, at a conceptual level, an insular power that can stop its enemies crossing water cannot be harmed. The sea is heavily defence-favourable, meaning that insular powers are less territorially threatened and can, in turn, afford to be less territorially threatening themselves (which makes them fewer enemies).45 Granted, the practical significance of this conceptual point is not as great in the era of the ballistic missile, cyber attack and airline-borne terrorist as it was in the Napoleonic Wars, but it remains salient. This is because insular powers can provide for their security with far less (if any) need to build powerful armies and send those armies into continental commitments than is the case for continental powers. An insular power that has the maritime capability (in terms of naval and air forces) to secure its oceanic moats and wider sea lines of communication, the retaliatory capability to deter aerial attacks (either nuclear or conventional), and robust cyber defences, is essentially impervious against coercion by another state. Terrorists may still get in or be home-grown, of course – but then states not involved in foreign occupations are less likely to have a terrorism problem anyway.

What would a grand strategy of offshore balancing mean for the practical specifics of the United Kingdom’s military capability set? First, and most crucially, a secure second strike nuclear deterrent capability must be retained. As the British government has itself identified,

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an undetectable submarine-based system of nuclear ballistic missiles represents the most assured possible guarantee of retaliation, which removes first-strike incentives and crisis instability.\textsuperscript{46} This makes such a system the ultimate credible hedge against re-emerging major power threats. Second, UK military capabilities should remain intrinsically maritime (which does not solely mean naval, given the potency of aircraft when it comes to controlling seaways).\textsuperscript{47} On a fundamental level, if Britain can control the Northeast Atlantic and the country’s wider sea lines of communication, the core basis of UK national security will remain intact, regardless of conflict dynamics in the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{48} And when London does see a need to coerce others, this can happen quickly, kinetically, and with a light political footprint from – or via the threat of – ships and sea-crossing aircraft.

Third, as a broad principle, balance must be retained in the UK armed forces. To make this point less vague, capabilities of the kind that would be useful for deterring – and if necessary fighting – other militarily-capable states should be preserved, even if that means numerous small pockets of capability that appear individually inefficient in the short term. That way, there remains the potential to scale capabilities back up in the more threatening strategic environment that is likely to characterise the 2020s and 2030s, rather than having to regenerate immensely complex military skills and technologies from scratch (pertinent current examples are anti-submarine warfare, air combat, and armoured warfare). The corollary to this is resisting further pushes towards – and eventually, rolling back from – the drive to configure UK military forces, particularly the Army, solely for counterinsurgency and stabilisation. Offshore balancers tend to use their armies far less frequently, but when their use in a deterrent or combat capacity does become likely, they need to have the

\textsuperscript{47} Colin S. Gray, "Britain’s National Security: Compulsion and Discretion," \textit{RUSI Journal} 153, no. 6 (December 2008).
\textsuperscript{48} Britain probably cannot fulfil this strategic goal at the moment, given the last five years’ maritime force cuts, but a modest capability restoration would bring fulfilment back in reach.
capabilities and scalability to fight other advanced and well-equipped ground forces.

Moreover, while certain ‘new’ threats are rightly being seen as likely to figure heavily in future interstate conflicts, therefore meriting substantial current expenditure – most notably, defence against cyber attacks – we must be careful not to trust to much to arguments that the ‘old’ methods will be obsolete in fifteen, twenty, or even forty years time. After all, Stephen Biddle has comprehensively demonstrated that the tactical and operational measures that determine victory on the battlefield remained largely unchanged between late 1917 and the early twenty-first century.\(^\text{49}\) Bold predictions that the coming ten years are certain to involve more radical military transformations than the previous century did should therefore be treated with caution.

Finally, to make one last point in this vein, it is worth pointing out that if certain aspects of the future contingencies described above come to pass, the retention of balanced UK armed forces equipped for major high-end war-fighting will be doubly important. If Goldman Sachs are right, Russia will be Europe’s largest economy by 2050 – but the United Kingdom will be the next biggest, having overtaken Germany. Coupled to the likelihood of US strategic interest in Europe waning to the point where Washington will no longer carry the European NATO members’ defence burden, this could well leave the United Kingdom as the leading power in a Western European defensive alliance seeking to balance a pre-eminent rival power. That could imply a European strategic future with a distinctly historical flavour.

**Back to the Future: The Return of Prudence and the End of Interventionist Dreams**

In the summer of 1990, John Mearsheimer published an article entitled, ‘Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War’.\(^\text{50}\) Today, it is commonplace – particularly in the


European IR community – to deride Mearsheimer’s prediction that, with the Soviet threat gone and the US strategic commitment subsequently reduced, European states would once again become prone to major power security competition. The standard charge is that he failed to grasp the extent to which institutional and normative enmeshment now bound Western European states into relationships of friendship and amicable dispute resolution.

Both sides in this debate probably have a valid point to make. Mearsheimer’s argument was that, with the Soviet threat gone, the United States would no longer see value in stationing a large military force in Europe, and that the corollary pacifying effect of this continental security umbrella would thus be removed. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that he was wrong on a key pillar of the argument: in the absence of many other serious threats, there was evidently not a powerful enough strategic rationale for US forces to not be stationed in Europe to overcome the fiscal, bureaucratic, administrative and logistical challenges involved in relocation. As a consequence, the US troop commitment was not reduced by as much as he had anticipated in the 1990s and 2000s. However, the rationale underlying his position – that European cooperation would be harder to sustain in the face of the burdens and pressures that come with independently providing for national security – has not yet been falsified. That said, of course, it is hard to deny that the European Union has substantially deepened as a mechanism of institutional and normative enmeshment since the end of the Cold War to the point where it binds members more firmly than any other international organisation before or since, and this was not something that Mearsheimer necessarily anticipated back in 1990.

Obsessing about who ‘won’ the argument on the future of intra-Western European relations misses the broader insight emerging from the “back to the future” thesis, however, not least because peace amongst EU members is heavily over-determined by a range of institutional, normative and strategic factors (long may this remain the case). Rather, the key
message for the Western security scholars and policymakers of today should be that the fundamental nature of international politics may be shown to have changed far less than it is frequently argued. This would in turn mean that once the intervening variables that provide a barrier to great power competition are removed, there would always remain the potential for it to reassert itself. And should great power competition reassert itself, this would have knock-on consequences for the strategic environment – and the grand-strategic response that this environment necessitates from states – even in such internal zones of relative amicability as the Euro-Atlantic alliance.51

The analysis provided in this paper suggests that “back to the future” may indeed be a fair characterisation of the future of great power politics, both in general global terms, and when applied to the extra-Western strategic context (albeit not the intra-Western context). Economic integration drives shifts in the balance of power, due to the catch-up convergence growth generated by transfers of capital and technology, and shifts in the balance of power generate conflict incentives; this combined integration-convergence-conflict process played out between 1870 and 1914 and now appears to be underway again. The first signs of such a return to great power competition are visible in the economic trajectories and diplomatic relationships of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and there is a case to suggest that the global strategic environment will continue to move in this direction over the coming years. This is in turn likely to impact on the Euro-Atlantic strategic context, peaceful intra-regional relations notwithstanding, and such impact will carry implications for Western states’ grand strategic choices. The United Kingdom, in particular – as a major regional power that has had a particular penchant for capability-sapping discretionary wars since 2001 – needs to rediscover the art of conserving its strength if it is to retain the ability to safeguard its own vital interests in a competitive multipolar world. Only by returning to a maritime

51 Plus, as noted above, we have yet to see how the European project itself will cope with the tensions and pressures of self-protection that could follow from a hollowed-out US commitment to European defence.
grand strategy of offshore balancing, resourcing defence properly while resisting the temptation to overuse the acquired capabilities, and eschewing all but the most essential direct military interventions will this strength-conservation be achievable.

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