

THE STRATEGY OF DENIAL

AMERICAN DEFENSE IN AN AGE
OF GREAT POWER CONFLICT

ELBRIDGE A. COLBY

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Yale

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This book is dedicated to my father, Jonathan, with profound respect and gratitude for his example and encouragement

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive. . . .

Nothing is more important in life than finding the right standpoint for seeing and judging events, and then adhering to it. . . . Policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument.

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

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PREFACE

WHAT IS THE BEST DEFENSE STRATEGY for America?

In other words, for what purposes should the United States be prepared to fight, and how should US military forces be readied to fight such wars? Because these questions involve life and death and loss on a great scale, they cannot be answered sensibly without a clear sense of the purposes such a strategy should serve.

For many years, these questions were not so pressing or pointed. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was so much more powerful than any plausible rival that it could readily best any opponent over any interest for which it might realistically care to contend. While the United States might not have been able to seize Beijing or Moscow without suffering a nuclear retort, it had no reason to try. It enjoyed global preeminence without going to such lengths. For anything it might care to fight over—against Russia over NATO or against China over Taiwan, the South China Sea, or Japan—it needed only to apply the resources required to prevail.

That world is gone. The “unipolar moment” is over.¹

Above all, this is because of the rise of China. Napoleon is supposed to have remarked that, when China rose, the world would quake.² China has now arisen—and is continuing to rise. And the world is quaking. For the first time since the nineteenth century, the United States no longer boasts the world’s indisputably largest economy. As a result, we are witnessing a return to what is commonly referred to as “great power competition.” This is a euphemism for an almost physical reality: an object so large must have the greatest consequence for any system that must accommodate it. China’s enormous size and sophistication mean that its rise will be of the utmost significance. It is one thing to describe the phenomenon; it is another thing to understand how to react to it.

This book seeks to explain what this reality means for the defense of the United States and its important interests. It is motivated by the concern that

Americans and those interested in America's defense strategy do not yet have a framework to answer these questions in a way that is at once comprehensive, rigorous, and sound. There are, of course, contemporary works on strategy—many superb—but they are mostly concerned with grand strategy. Few lay out a single, coherent framework that provides clear guidance on what the nation's defense strategy should be as an outgrowth of its grand strategy.³

The absence of such a framework is a serious problem. In the unipolar era, Americans could make decisions about strategic questions without too much fear of the consequences; America's preponderance of power buffered it from the results of its decisions becoming too painful.

This is no longer the case. Power is now more diffuse, and the places to which it is diffusing—especially China—are not established US allies. Ten years ago, the United States spent more on defense than the next eighteen countries combined, and most of the immediately trailing countries were close allies. Today, that margin has shrunk; it spends as much as the next seven combined, and China, which has leapt into second place, has increased its defense spending by around 10 percent every year for the past twenty-five years. And the margin is likely to shrink further as China grows.⁴

It is not only the structure of global power that has changed. In the 1990s or 2000s, one could imagine that the world was becoming more peaceful and cooperative; states such as China and Russia appeared largely to accept the international lay of the land. Recently, however, the world has become more tense, if not rivalrous, in ways that reflect not just structural changes but also the reemergence of a more overtly competitive attitude. This has meant that major war, which once seemed a thing of the past at least in certain parts of the world, now seems considerably more plausible.

How should the United States orient itself to all this? The fundamental reality is that there are now structural limitations on what the United States can do—it cannot do everything at once. Thus it must make hard choices. And with hard choices, a framework for making them—a strategy—is crucial. A state can muddle through without a conscious strategy when the consequences are minor, when others determine its fate, or when it is already servant to an existing strategic framework. But, given their

newfound limits, Americans now need to reconcile their international aspirations and commitments with their ability and willingness to follow through on them. To make intelligent decisions under such conditions, Americans need a basis for determining what is important and what is not, what the primary threats to the nation's interests are, and how best to serve those interests in a way that is attentive to the costs and risks they are willing to bear.

Importantly, a strategy is a framework, not a master plan. It is predicated on a coherent view of the world and provides a logic within which to make choices and prioritize. It is, at its heart, a *simplifying logic* to deal with a complex world that would otherwise be bewildering. Strategy, in this sense, is like any good theory meant to help explain the world—it should be as simple as possible, but no simpler. Without such a logic, there is no coherent way to discern what is truly important and needs to be specially prepared for versus what can be managed or ignored. In the situation of scarce resources in which the United States now finds itself, this is a recipe for frustration or disaster.

A strategic framework is especially necessary in times of transition like today, when the ideas and frameworks of yesteryear become increasingly mismatched with reality. The generation of post-Cold War primacy unmoored some Americans, or at least some of their leaders and eminent thinkers, from underlying realities, giving them a highly exaggerated sense of what the United States could and should accomplish in the international arena. This has had a number of sorry results. Moreover, many of America's leading thinkers on international affairs retain this heady sensibility, as if hoping the nation can will itself back to unipolarity, even as many ordinary Americans sense that things have changed profoundly. At the same time, there is a powerful strain, especially in the academy, of arguing that the United States should retrench and adopt a dramatically less engaged foreign policy than it has pursued since the Second World War.

My aim in this book is to describe how Americans can deal with this new reality and can pursue and protect their important interests abroad at levels of risk and cost they can realistically and justifiably bear. In particular, I am concerned with how they can be prepared to wage war for very important interests and do so in a sane way. This is a defense strategy book; it is rooted in a grand strategy, but its focus is on military affairs. War

is not just another province of human activity; I argue that military affairs are in important respects determinative. But they are not comprehensive, and if defense strategy is done right, they can be made marginal. Success for the strategy in this book would be precisely this result: a situation in which the threat of war is *not* salient. But attaining this goal, paradoxically, requires a clear and rigorous focus on war. Readers will not find here any discussion of how to compete with China economically, how most international institutions should evolve, or any number of other problems in international politics. This is not because these are not important issues—they are—but because if Americans do not have the right defense strategy, these other considerations and interests will be forced to take a backseat. Figuring out that strategy is the task of this book.

Although this is a book about war—why it happens, for what purposes it should be fought, and how it should be waged—it is designed to promote peace, particularly a decent peace. But a decent peace compatible with Americans’ freedom, security, and prosperity does not spontaneously generate.⁵ It is an achievement. This book is designed to try to show how Americans might achieve such a peace at a level of cost and risk they can bear in an era when a decent peace can no longer be taken for granted.

Plan of the Book

This book proceeds deductively, beginning from first principles and presenting conclusions only after the logic leading to them has been established. The idea is to allow the reader to see the logical progression clearly, rather than starting from conclusions and then justifying them. I provide the plan below for those who wish to have a clear sense of where they are heading or who want to read selectively. Chapters 1 through 4 lay out the broad geopolitical strategy that should guide American defense strategy. Chapters 5–11 present the military strategy needed to uphold that broader strategy. Chapter 12 is a short conclusion.

Chapter 1 lays out the fundamental purposes of American grand strategy and how they shape US defense strategy. It introduces the central role of balances of power, with an emphasis on the core objective of denying any other state hegemony over one of the world’s key regions in

order to preserve Americans' security, freedom, and prosperity. It explains why Asia is the world's most important region, given its wealth and power, and why China is the world's other most important state. Like other very powerful states, China has a most potent interest in establishing hegemony over its region, and, predictably, Beijing appears to be pursuing this goal. Denying China hegemony over Asia is therefore the cardinal objective of US grand strategy.

Chapter 2 explains why favorable regional balances of power matter for US strategy. It describes the role of anti-hegemonic coalitions in upholding such balances, namely, by leaguering together enough states to agglomerate more power than an aspiring regional hegemon and its confederates can muster. This chapter describes the challenges to forming and sustaining such coalitions in the face of an aspiring regional hegemon, especially when the aspirant employs a focused and sequential strategy designed to short-circuit or break apart any such coalition. Such a strategy allows the aspiring hegemon to focus on and isolate coalition members in sequence, progressively weakening the coalition until the aspirant is able to achieve its hegemony. This problem points to the importance of a cornerstone balancer—especially an external cornerstone balancer—and the United States' unique ability to play this role. Last, the chapter explains why the United States must focus on playing this role in Asia, given that an anti-hegemonic coalition is unlikely to form against China without America doing so and the much better prospects that such coalitions will form and sustain themselves in other key regions with a more modest American contribution.

Chapter 3 outlines the importance of alliances—formal commitments to fight for other states—within an anti-hegemonic coalition, which can itself be a more informal grouping that includes both alliances and less entangling partnerships. Alliances provide reassurance to states that might otherwise bandwagon with an aspiring hegemon such as China, especially in the face of its focused and sequential strategy. But, for participants, they also present the risk of entanglement in unnecessary or too costly wars. This is especially because defense of an ally, especially by a cornerstone balancer such as the United States, needs to be both effective and credible, which may not be easy to achieve. What matters most, however, is not American credibility in some general sense—that is, upholding every pledge or promise the United States has ever made, however imprudent—but US

differentiated credibility in Asia: the degree to which important actors in the region believe that the United States will defend them effectively against China. The primary importance of this differentiated credibility, in turn, permits the United States to make difficult but important choices in other theaters without undermining its differentiated credibility in Asia.

Chapter 4 is about defining the US alliance, or defense, perimeter. Because the success of the anti-hegemonic coalition depends on America's protecting and husbanding its differentiated credibility, the United States must carefully select which states to include and exclude. If it undercommits, the coalition will be too weak; if it overcommits, it risks overextension, defeat, and the loss of its differentiated credibility. While some states, such as Japan and Australia, should obviously be included, whether others should be is less clear-cut. Because of the delicacy and competitiveness of the power balance, the United States should seek to include as many states as it can defend while excluding those it cannot. But this question of defensibility cannot be answered without an understanding of the best military strategy for the United States. Thus we must apprehend what America's best military strategy is before we can identify its optimal defense perimeter.

Chapter 5 begins the discussion of the best military strategy for the United States in light of this broad geopolitical challenge. It discusses the problems of conducting a limited war against China, given that both sides possess survivable nuclear arsenals, and explains why the United States must prepare to fight a limited war in this context. The chapter lays out why, in any war between the United States and China, both sides have the strongest incentives to keep the conflict limited, including most fundamentally by taking steps to avoid a large-scale nuclear war. Because neither side can reasonably contemplate a total war over partial (even if very important) stakes, the prevailing side will be the one that fights more effectively under whatever constraints emerge. This means that the victor will be the one that can achieve its goals while leaving such a heavy burden of escalation on the other side that the opponent either practically cannot or will not escalate its way out of a partial defeat.

Chapter 6 argues that, in its defense planning, the United States needs to focus on China's best military strategies rather than simply pleading

ignorance and preparing for all eventualities or focusing on China's likeliest or most destructive potential strategies.

Chapter 7 argues that China's best military strategy is likely to be a fait accompli strategy against an exposed member of the anti-hegemonic coalition, especially one connected by an alliance or quasi-alliance to Washington. This is because strategies that rely on persuading a targeted country to give up core goods such as autonomy—as China would need to do to establish its regional hegemony—are likely to fail. Instead, China is likely to rely primarily on brute force to subordinate targeted states while depending on persuasion to deter that state's allies from coming effectively to its defense. The optimal form of this strategy is the fait accompli whereby China seizes vulnerable US confederates such as Taiwan or the Philippines while deterring a sufficiently strong defense by the United States and any other states that might participate. Applied sequentially, this strategy could undermine US differentiated credibility and weaken the coalition until it collapses, opening the way for China to become the regional hegemon. China's first target for this strategy is likely to be Taiwan, given its proximity to China and status as a US quasi-ally.

Chapter 8 lays out the optimal US response to China's best strategy. Restoring military dominance over China is infeasible, given its size and growth trajectory. Horizontal or vertical escalation is likely to fail or result in destruction out of proportion to any gains. Accordingly, America's best military strategy is a denial defense, or a strategy that seeks to deny China's ability to use military force to achieve its political objectives. China's strategy of subordinating targeted states through a fait accompli requires more than seizing peripheral territory: it must seize and hold the target state's key territory. With this leverage, Beijing could impose its terms; without it, it is unlikely to persuade even moderately resolute states to forgo their autonomy. Accordingly, the United States and any other engaged coalition members should seek to deny China the attainment of this standard. They can do so either by preventing China from seizing a target state's key territory in the first place or by ejecting the invaders before they can consolidate their hold on it.

Chapter 9 argues that if a Chinese invasion of Taiwan or the Philippines can be defeated in one of these ways, then Beijing will bear a heavy burden of escalation. China is very unlikely to be able to escalate its way to victory

from such a defeat, since any such effort is likely to catalyze an effective coalition response. In such circumstances, the defenders can either settle in for a protracted war on an advantageous basis or attempt to coerce China's acceptance of defeat, most effectively through a strategy mixing elements of denial with cost imposition. If the defenders can defeat China's best military strategy even in the case of Taiwan, the anti-hegemonic coalition will very likely succeed in blocking Beijing's pursuit of regional hegemony.

Chapter 10 begins by emphasizing that conducting such an effective defense of Taiwan, while feasible, is by no means easy; China may be too powerful or the participating elements of the coalition too ill prepared for the defenders to mount an effective resistance. In this case, the defenders may have to substantially expand the war to conduct an effective denial defense, in effect assuming a heavy burden of escalation. Alternatively, if the defenders cannot prevent a successful Chinese invasion, the coalition might even be forced to recapture a lost ally. In this case, the key question is how the coalition, which should—if it is to serve its purpose—constitute a network of states with greater total power than China and its confederates, can muster the resolve to take the costly and risky steps needed to prevail. The solution to this problem is a binding strategy. This is an approach that deliberately positions the coalition members, including the United States, such that China's ability to employ its best military strategy would catalyze the coalition members' resolve to defeat it. The logic is to ensure that China, by putting its best strategy into effect, will make clear to the coalition members that they are better off defeating it now rather than later. This can be done if China's actions make the coalition members believe that it is more aggressive, ambitious, cruel, unreliable, powerful, or disrespectful of their honor than they had previously thought.

Chapter 11 lays out the implications for US defense strategy that follow from the book. The top priority for the US defense establishment should be ensuring that China cannot subordinate a US ally or quasi-ally in Asia, with the first priority being developing and maintaining the ability to conduct a denial defense of Taiwan. In light of this, the United States should maintain its existing defense perimeter in Asia. It should generally seek to avoid assuming additional alliances, particularly on the Asian mainland, but, if conditions require it, consider selectively adding a small number of Asian states as allies. The United States should also maintain a strong nuclear

deterrent and a focused but effective counterterrorism posture; it should also maintain a missile defense shield against North Korea and Iran if this is not too costly. On the other hand, in order to focus its scarce resources, the United States should not size, shape, or posture its military to deal simultaneously with any other scenario alongside a war with China over Taiwan. Its first, overriding priority must be the effective defense of allies in Asia against China. If the United States does want additional insurance, however, it can make some provision for the one other scenario in which the United States might not realistically be able to defeat an opponent's theory of victory after defeating a Chinese assault on an ally in Asia: defeating a Russian fait accompli attempt against an eastern NATO ally, which is the only other scenario in which the United States could find itself facing a great power armed with a survivable nuclear arsenal and able to seize and hold allied territory. That said, the United States should seek to have European states assume the greater role in NATO. Last, this chapter considers what to do if both a denial defense and binding strategy fail; in this event, selective friendly nuclear proliferation may be the least bad option, though this would not be a panacea and would be dangerous.

In [chapter 12](#), the book ends by emphasizing that the ultimate goal of this strategy is to be able to come to a decent peace and an acceptable détente with China. Achieving this, however, requires firm and focused action, and acceptance of the distinct possibility of war with China.

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THE STRATEGY OF DENIAL

1

The Purposes of American Strategy

A DEFENSE STRATEGY IS A WAY of employing, posturing, and developing military assets, forces, and relationships to attain a set of goals that are derived from and designed to serve broader political aims. My purpose in this book is to consider what America's defense strategy should be.

The Fundamental Purposes of American Strategy

Charting such a strategy must begin with identifying America's overall national objectives. These are, of course, subject to debate and not susceptible to precise definition; it is in the nature of a free society that these core questions are never fully settled. Yet certain fundamental political goals are very likely to command broad agreement among Americans. These are to maintain the nation's territorial integrity and, within that territory, security from foreign attack; sustain a free, autonomous, and vigorous democratic-republican political order; and enable economic flourishing and growth. In simpler terms, our basic national objectives are to provide Americans with physical security, freedom, and prosperity.¹

Physical security is the cornerstone of all other interests and values; without it, people cannot take advantage of either freedom or prosperity and may lose them entirely. But physical security alone is not sufficient. To fulfill even the most basic understanding of America's political purposes, Americans must be free enough to determine their national life—to choose their own fate. Last, Americans must be sufficiently prosperous, not only

for its own sake but to undergird confidence in their society's fairness. Americans may elect to pursue ends beyond these three, but they may plausibly do so only if they are sufficiently secure, free, and prosperous.

The Central Role of the Balance of Power

The international arena in which the United States pursues these objectives remains anarchic, in the sense that there is no global sovereign to make and enforce judgments in a dispute.² In this context, security, freedom, and prosperity cannot be taken for granted; they are not self-generating. This is for two reasons. First, in an ungoverned situation, actors may rationally seek advantage and profit by using force to take from or undermine others. Second, inherently vulnerable actors may find it prudent to take preventive action against potential threats: the best defense may be a good offense. These factors mean that the prospect of force shadows Americans' pursuit of these goals.

To ensure its security, freedom, and prosperity, any country, including the United States, has a most powerful interest in ensuring *a favorable balance of power* with respect to its key interests. This is simply another way of saying that the most effective way to check another from doing something one does not want to abide is to be more powerful than the other is with respect to that interest. If one fails to maintain a favorable balance, one's enjoyment of these goods will be at the sufferance of the one who enjoys the advantage.

Ensuring America's security, freedom, and prosperity thus requires us to address the foundational role of power. To fulfill its core purposes, the United States should seek sustainably favorable military-economic balances of power with respect to the key regions of the world. In this chapter I will lay out the following key principles:

- Power in this context is composed of military-economic strength.
- The actors that matter most are states.
- Balances of power particularly matter in the key regions of the world, which are those where military-economic strength is clustered.
- The purpose of balancing is to deny another state hegemony over one of the key regions of the world.

- The favorable balance should be sustainable over time.

What Is the Balance of Power?

Physical force, especially the ability to kill, is the ultimate form of coercive leverage. While there are other sources of influence, such as wealth, persuasiveness, and charisma, they are all dominated by the power to kill. One with the ability to kill another can, if willing, escalate any dispute to that level and thus prevail. Although hard power is not the only form of power, it is dominant if effectively employed; hard power always has the capacity to dominate soft power. Left unaddressed, might trumps right. Therefore, to protect its interests, the United States must be especially concerned about the use of physical force.

In stable societies, the sovereign monopolizes the legitimate use of violence: this is law and order. But because there is no global sovereign, war—violence at a large and organized scale—is the final court of appeal in the international arena; if a disputant resorts to force, differences will ultimately be resolved in favor of the side that more effectively musters enough military power. To protect their interests in the international sphere, states such as the United States must therefore actively address the threat of violent force.

This is not to say that violence is always the most visible element of power. To the contrary: other elements of power—political, commercial, intellectual, ideological, spiritual—are usually more prominent, and mutually beneficial cooperation is normal and natural. But this is true only when the threat of violence is confined and regulated, and because of its capacity to dominate, this in turn requires the threat of violence itself. In other words, precisely to allow these softer instruments of power to be more influential, the threat of violence needs to be constrained. And because violence is the most important element of power, military power is ultimately necessary to constrain it.

Who Matters for the Balance of Power?

This reality means that US strategy for the world must first and foremost reckon with those with the power to wield large-scale violence,

which means those that can muster military power. Less powerful actors, particularly those with some means of wreaking catastrophic violence (such as weapons of mass destruction), can pose a serious threat, but their weakness, by definition, means that more powerful parties have ways to deal with them. Specifically how the United States can do so is addressed later in this book.

In the modern world, military power derives from the ability to raise and command capable armed forces. Modern militaries, especially the more advanced and effective ones, are highly sophisticated, complex, and often large. They are therefore expensive and must be supported by advanced, robust economic and technological bases. Further, they are administratively and logistically demanding and need highly capable administrative structures to enforce the cohesion and command the obedience needed for effective war making.

In the contemporary era and for the foreseeable future, the only entities able to generate such modern militaries are *states*. The ultimate form of power in the international system, then, results from a state or group of states leveraging violence. And the states that have the most of this fundamental coercive leverage are those with the most wealth and internal cohesion. Thus, in practice, the states with the most military power are those with the greatest economic resources.

If the United States were more powerful in this sense than any combination of other states, it would enjoy a favorable power advantage under any conceivable circumstances. In such a situation, no state could meaningfully coerce it. To maintain such a favorable distribution, it would need only to tend to its own power base to at least stay abreast of other states' growth.

The United States does not, however, enjoy such a preponderance of power—nor will it. Rather, although it is very powerful, its power is substantially outweighed by that of the rest of the world.³ If enough of the rest of the world's power were aggregated against it, the United States could be coerced with respect to its security, freedom, and prosperity; others could compel it to accept things Americans really do not want to tolerate. Accordingly, the United States should not allow such an unfavorable balance of power to form against it.

Where Does the Balance of Power Matter?

The states that matter most—the ones whose economies can support the generation of significant military power—are not randomly distributed but are clustered in particular regions. These key regions boast the vast majority of the active or latent military power that constitutes the most coercive form of leverage. In addition to North America, there are two regions—Asia and Europe—that have as much or more economic capacity that could be translated into military power as the United States and one subregion—the Persian Gulf—of notable significance.

The key regions of the world, ranked in order of geopolitical importance, are:

- *Asia.* Asia comprises approximately 40 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP), and given that it is the locus of about two-thirds of global growth, its share of global economic activity is rising.⁴ Taken together, the Asian economies are already far larger than that of the United States and are increasingly advanced economically and technologically. From a geopolitical perspective, Asia is therefore the world's most important region.
- *Europe.* Europe comprises nearly one-quarter of global GDP, and its economies are on the whole considerably more advanced than most of Asia's.⁵ For the United States, it is therefore the critical secondary external region after Asia.
- *North America.* North America is geopolitically important because of the United States. According to widely used estimates, the United States accounts for just under one-fifth of global GDP in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. Largely because of this, most assessments rank the United States first in global power, though some indicate that China has surpassed it.⁶ The rest of North America is modest in power and share of global economic activity, making the region unique in that it is overwhelmingly dominated by a single state.
- *The Persian Gulf.* The Persian Gulf is a far smaller and less important region than the others, comprising less than 5 percent of global GDP.⁷ The Persian Gulf is home, however, to roughly 40 percent of the world's oil and natural gas reserves.⁸ Control over these resources

would provide a large source of power that could be readily leveraged, given their centrality in the carbon-based world economy. This strategic concern does not, however, extend to the remainder of the Middle East and North Africa; the power of this area would not make a material difference to American security, freedom, or prosperity.⁹ The United States has a direct interest in preventing transnational terrorism against itself or its allies, but this is a more limited concern that can be addressed more narrowly.

The rest of the world is considerably less important in terms of military-economic power. If all of Latin America were to be agglomerated, it would represent approximately one-half of the total power of the United States.¹⁰ This is significant, but by itself it would be manageable. The United States could not be meaningfully coerced by a grouping representing just half its power. Africa, the world's remaining major inhabited continent, is the least developed part of the world. Sub-Saharan Africa represents roughly 3 percent of global GDP, so gathering its power together would not result in a major threat to the United States.¹¹ Central Asia has some wealth and natural resources, but not nearly enough to plausibly contest core US purposes.¹² The rest of the world offers little power. Oceania is exceptionally small in population and economic power, and the poles are unoccupied. The fates of these regions are essentially completely determined elsewhere. The same is true of outer space for the foreseeable future.

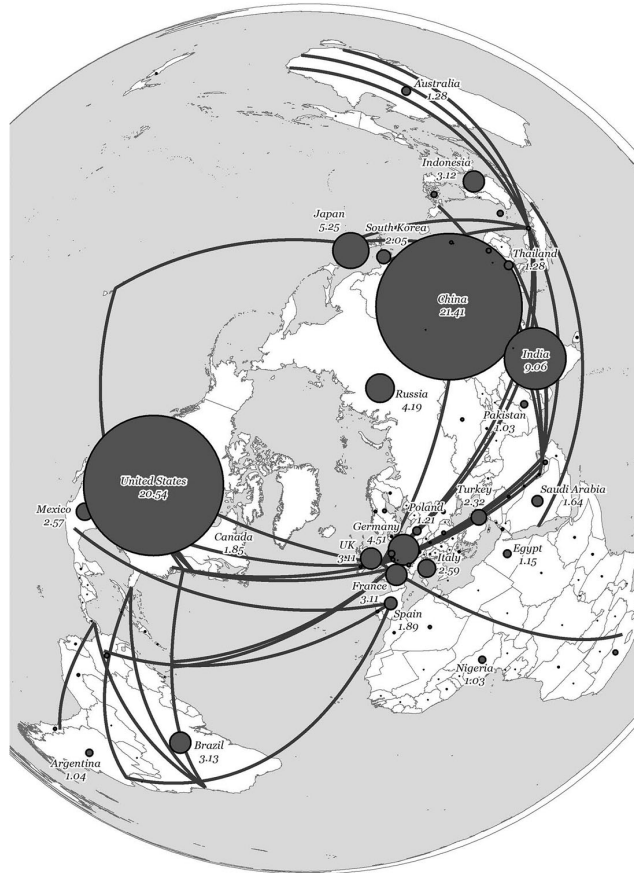
Asia in particular and then Europe and North America are thus the decisive theaters for global politics; Asia alone is a larger economy than Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and Oceania combined.¹³ If a state could leverage the wealth of one of those decisive theaters, it could dominate a state ascendant in one of the other regions. It was this recognition that led Winston Churchill to remark, "If we win the big battle in the decisive theater, we can put everything straight afterwards."¹⁴ For this reason, the United States has long been focused on what George Kennan famously identified in the early Cold War as the key "centers of military and industrial power."¹⁵

What Is Balancing Supposed to Do?

The mere existence of power in key regions is not what the United States should fear. Instead, it should care about the use of the power of these regions to materially impair America's security, freedom, and prosperity.

American concern should therefore focus on a state or states that could direct or marshal the power of one of these key regions. This is because no single state in the current environment—not even China, the world's other most powerful state—possesses sufficient power on its own to plausibly coerce the United States over its fundamental purposes; only some conglomeration of other states could gather the power to do this. Thus the only way the United States could face a situation in which other states were substantially stronger than America over the issues it really cares about would be if the power of one or more of these key regions were agglomerated.

The most plausible form by which a state could accumulate such power is *hegemony*, meaning that a state exercises authority over other states and extracts benefits from them, but without the responsibilities or risks of direct control. In this book I will use the term *predominance* interchangeably with *hegemony*.¹⁶ (Empire, the other way that states exercise control over other states, is much more costly because it requires direct administrative control by the imperial center. Direct imperial control tends to be rarer in the modern world.)



Global distribution of economic power. Proportional circles depict national GDP in USD trillions, at 2018 PPP rates. Economies over \$1 trillion are labeled with total GDP value. Lines depict direct flight paths of top global long-haul air routes. Lambert Equal Area Projection. Original map by Andrew Rhodes.

It is almost invariably a unitary state that can aspire to hegemony over a region. In theory, a group or coalition of states could establish regional hegemony, but such a group would face tremendous collective action problems in trying to establish and sustain a joint form of predominance. This is due to the question of who would decide if the group could not agree on some contentious issue. Because of this, it is very difficult to find stable empires or hegemonic systems that involve shared state power. Thus an aspiring hegemon is, generally speaking, a state located or active in the region that is powerful enough to plausibly establish hegemonic control. More particularly, it is likely to be a state that is the most powerful within a region by a considerable margin. A state that is the strongest by only a modest degree will find it much more difficult to impose its predominance over its neighbors, for reasons I will discuss later.