

**FORAY INTO A MULTIPOLAR WORLD  
LESSONS FROM THE BRITISH EMPIRE'S RELATIVE DECLINE**

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Capstone Project

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## Summary

As the global landscape shifts from a unipolar to a multipolar system, the U.S. faces increasing challenges to its leadership role, particularly from rising powers like China and Russia. These nations are contesting the U.S.A on economic, military, and ideological fronts, posing threats to the international order that has been led by the U.S.A since end of World War II. While the U.S.A aims to uphold this established order, history indicates that such transitions often involve conflict and wars. Drawing from the past, the British Empire's shift from its global leadership position to a multipolar setting in the 19th century provides critical lessons for navigating the U.S.A's present geopolitical situation.

### **Key insights from the British experience:**

1. As circumstances changed, Britain continually adapted its strategies to align with evolving national objectives, transitioning from an isolationist stance to forming major alliances within just a few decades.
2. The protection of key interests often led to the acquisition of new interests, requiring even more resources, presenting Britain with the challenge of sourcing these resources either externally or by diverting domestic allocations.
3. The reallocation of domestic resources for global dominance led to internal tensions and discussions about imperial overreach, prompting Britain to reconsider the sustainability of its global leadership role.
4. While alliances with regional powers were seen as a means to reduce security expenses, they inadvertently exacerbated global tensions by feeding into the security dilemmas of adversaries.

5. Despite a range of strategic approaches to prevent conflict, the complexity of European alliances in the late 19th and early 20th centuries ultimately dragged Britain into a major war in 1914.

### **Key Implications for the USA:**

1. As new powers emerge, nations that previously held dominance can find themselves in security competitions across various geographies and technological domains, as evidenced by Britain's global security challenges in the wake of emerging powers. Considering the breadth of its obligations and the diverse locations of its foes, the US will need tailored military strategies for different regions and opponents.
2. Though there's scant evidence to suggest an imminent American decline Security competition with adversaries can potentially challenge fiscal resilience and broader economy. Nevertheless, relying solely on the historic resilience and adaptability of the American system without proactive measures might be shortsighted, especially when facing the nuances of relative decline.
3. Strategy of reluctance in deploying forces unless critically necessary (like Offshore Balancing) can help a nation achieve global predominance, but it might not be the most effective strategy for maintaining that dominance unless there's a significant advantage in various domains over adversaries.
4. Britain's partnership with the USA early 20th century was crucial in helping Britain maintain its global position despite its relative decline. For the U.S., strengthening alliances, especially in regions with emerging threats, can be crucial. Current U.S. alliances in the Persian Gulf and the Indo-Pacific, for instance, are strategic moves to counter growing influences, much like Britain's efforts in the early 20th century.

5. The First World War illustrated Britain's dependency on its allies for achieving victory, signalling the end of British global dominance. The U.S. should be wary of situations where its capacity to act independently is compromised, even if it has powerful allies.

Going forward, changes in the international system will force the USA to consistently reevaluate its policy objectives and approaches in line with the changing global dynamics.

Importantly, these strategies might need swift adjustments, at times even demanding a shift from previous policy positions.

## Introduction

Human progress as a species is largely attributed to our innate ability to collaborate. Such collaboration often emerged from the innate fear of other humans or more formidable predators. This quest for safety and defense was pivotal to human survival and state formation<sup>1</sup>. Over millennia, this need metamorphosed into the formation of modern nation-states. Although modern states offer a vast array of services to their citizens, ensuring security remains their fundamental purpose. Shifts of power in the international system is a well documented history. Usually in the rise and fall of states in the international system. These changes in the international system have had both positive and negative impact on the prosperity and security of the states. From Rome to Britain all states have seen their rise to power and the subsequent fall. Consequently, as the global political landscape shifts, the primary concern for nations is the implications for their security and by extension, that of their citizens.

### The recent transition

With the rise of China, an assertive Russia, and a dominant USA, the shadow of potential hegemonic conflict looms large. After enjoying three decades of unrivaled supremacy, the USA now views China and Russia as forces that seek to redefine the current world order. China, having experienced an unparalleled economic surge for nearly half a century, stands as a \$16 trillion economy<sup>2</sup>, forecasted to overtake the USA by 2028<sup>3</sup>, while also having the world's largest standing military force by personnel<sup>4</sup>. Russia, driven by its aspiration to regain

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (Yale University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1bvnfk9>.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Allison, "The Inconvenient Truth About U.S. Growth," accessed August 9, 2023, <https://www.barrons.com/articles/us-growth-gdp-china-economy-519a9c5>.

<sup>3</sup> "China to Leapfrog U.S. as World's Biggest Economy by 2028: Think Tank," *Reuters*, December 26, 2020, sec. Business News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-economy-idUSKBN29000C>.

<sup>4</sup> "World Bank Open Data," World Bank Open Data, accessed August 9, 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org>.

great power status and fears of encroaching Western alliances, undertook aggressive actions like the invasion of Ukraine<sup>5</sup>, resulting in an unending, draining conflict. Such geopolitical shifts pose grave challenges to the US's long-standing global leadership.

Since the Cold War's conclusion in 1991, the USA has occupied an unparalleled position in world politics – a singular hegemonic power, as Charles Krauthammer dubbed it, a "unipolar moment" or a "hyperpower"<sup>6</sup>. Historically, no nation has ever wielded such overwhelming influence. Under the USA's stewardship, the world witnessed significant prosperity over the past seven decades. This hegemony brought forth relative peace among major powers, a democratization wave, and a globalization era. However, signs now point towards the ebbing of this democratization wave, a transformation in globalization, and the re-emergence of competition among the great powers. Many scholars and experts in international relations contend that we are transitioning into a multipolar world.

The speculations of unipolarity's demise emerged concurrently with its onset. Grounded in structural realism, political analysts had long cautioned about rising powers that would eventually challenge US dominance (Layne, Krauthammer, Mearsheimer, etc). Such predictions gained traction post the 2008 financial crisis<sup>7</sup> and following the USA's ill-fated interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. China's burgeoning economy and Russia's brazen assertiveness underscore these multipolar geopolitical shifts. While the USA continues to be the most formidable geopolitical entity, backed by a robust military, a resilient economy, and strong alliances, its dreams of perpetual dominance appear to be waning. As General Joseph Dunford, former USA Joint Chief of Staff, said, "Russia and China are competitors to the

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<sup>5</sup> John J Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," n.d.

<sup>6</sup> George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U. S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (Cary, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2008), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tufts-ebooks/detail.action?docID=415323>.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana: This Time It's Real," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (March 2012): 203–13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00704.x>.



united states and both nations are looking to overturn the international rules-based order.”<sup>8</sup>

When nations pursue such upheavals, as Robert Gilpin asserts, it indicates a disequilibrium in the international system, foretelling a reshuffling and establishment of a new equilibrium that mirrors the altered power dynamics<sup>9</sup>.

### Lessons from History

In light of shifting global dynamics, the U.S. must delve into its history to grasp the current situation. It's crucial to understand our historical journey to make sense of today. This marks the U.S.'s second foray into a multipolar landscape. Unlike the first instance, where the U.S. was a budding regional contender in the vast power play, it now stands as a global leader aiming to sustain its supremacy. This historical perspective aids not just in setting goals and devising strategies, but also in adeptly steering through multipolar politics. The U.S. should draw lessons from its prior engagement in multipolarity, and equally, from the experiences of its ally and erstwhile dominant force, Britain.

Though it's debatable to compare the two nations at their zenith — given their distinct power dynamics — certain parallels are evident. While some question if the British Empire ever achieved true hegemony, its influence in 19th-century geopolitics was undeniable. The empire, at its pinnacle, had widespread constitutional, diplomatic, political, commercial, and cultural outreach globally, much like the U.S. Both nations share several similarities: they are beacons of liberal democracy, champions of free trade and globalization, and are fortified by their geographical positions, buffered by vast oceans. Their shared Anglo-Saxon lineage,

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<sup>8</sup> “Dunford Describes U.S. Great Power Competition with Russia, China,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed August 9, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1791811/dunford-describes-us-great-power-competition-with-russia-china/><https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1791811/dunford-describes-us-great-power-competition-with-russia-china/>.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Gilpin, ed., “The Nature of International Political Change,” in *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 9–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511664267.003>.

experience as unmatched global players, and a knack for maintaining peace amongst major powers further tie them together. However, this doesn't imply they were identical in their power structures. The focus here is on both being dominant forces of their times, transitioning into a multipolar environment after a prolonged geopolitical lead. Their shared status and the transition they underwent necessitates a comparison, making it a timely discussion.

By 1870, the British Empire was navigating its way into a multipolar era. Having basked in global dominance for over half a century, it began to sense challenges. The U.S. was rising post-civil war, propelling its economy, Germany was gaining momentum post its victory over France, Russia flaunted its military prowess after its 1856 defeat, and Japan was under the throes of the "Meiji Revolution", driven by concerns of European meddling. As the century neared its end, the British Empire found itself jostling with emerging powers across continents and seas. Russia's sphere of influence was growing in the Far East, South Asia, and the Middle East. France was making inroads in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Germany's shadow was growing in the Far East, Middle East, and Africa. Japan had announced its arrival as a major power in the Far East, and the U.S., with its naval capabilities, was posing challenges to Britain in the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific.

#### [A hard look at future](#)

Assuming a competition of world powers, as ascending states grow in strength, they may aim to disrupt the existing order when they perceive the potential gains outweigh the risks. This threatens the international structure that the USA has cultivated over seven decades, which has both solidified its global dominance and brought benefits. In response, the US might have to recalibrate its strategies.

In the face of this competition, the USA can anticipate three potential scenarios to navigate this power dynamic. Firstly, the US could reinforce its global dominance by allocating more

resources to uphold its commitments in the international realm. Secondly, the US could prioritize its traditional spheres of influence, both in economic and territorial terms, leaving global contention to other major powers or opting for a more collaborative power-sharing approach. This would mean minimizing its current commitments without compromising its international stance. Thirdly, if containment strategies against China or Russia falter, conflict might emerge as the primary means of determining global supremacy. Alternatively, the US could decide to peacefully transition its hegemonic status to a successor of its choice. However, Gilpin notes that historically, dominant powers rarely, if ever, willingly surrender their international supremacy to prevent conflict. Also, rising powers have typically sought to mold the system to fit their security and economic interests<sup>10</sup>.

The world has witnessed various efforts to design an international order that mitigates major conflicts. Examples include the Congress of Vienna after the Napoleonic Wars and the formation of the League of Nations post-WWI. Post-WWII saw the birth of the United Nations, envisioned to be more effective in preventing widespread conflicts. Yet, instances such as the US invasion of Iraq in 2002 and Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine challenge the efficiency of these global institutions. Strengthening the argument that the international system remains anarchic.

While these outcomes are conceivable, they are distinct paths, meaning multiple outcomes cannot be pursued simultaneously. Except for the first option, other scenarios could diminish the US's standing as a global powerhouse. The unsettling reality is that any efforts to rectify global power imbalances increases the chances of a major conflict. The turbulent 20th century serves as a stark reminder of how a multi-polar world can spiral into massive wars. Such prospects are daunting for societies that have thrived in peaceful times, prompting

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Gilpin, ed., "Hegemonic War and International Change," in *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 186–210, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511664267.007>.

contemplation on whether the reigning superpower should strive to avert such conflicts or let history unfold. Given the devastating potential of nuclear warfare, the former seems a wiser choice.

## Scope

Today geographically speaking, the U.S. and its allies are confronted by an assertive Russia in Eastern Europe and the Arctic, and a burgeoning China in the Indo-Pacific region. While the intense competition between these powers extends into various aspects of statecraft, this paper focuses its discourse on security matters. Central to this investigation is the premise that rising states like China and Russia will aim to disrupt the current system as their increasing power makes the potential gains seem worth the risks involved in altering the status quo. The key issue is the choice of strategy for the U.S. Should America pull back to the Western Hemisphere or actively engage in containing these emerging powers?

This paper seeks to identify strategic implications of rising competition for the USA by analyzing the strategic experience the British Empire as it navigated its entry into a multipolar world prior to onset of World War one. The study is organized into several sections: The first analyses the theoretical underpinning of change in the international system and its impact on security by summarizing the key literature. The second section analyses the peak and relative decline of the British Empire's global influence and maps the changes in Britain's strategy as it faced rising competition. The fourth section traces the ascent of the U.S. to unipolarity, identifies what factors made it unique and questions the debate around America's possible decline. The fifth section contrasts the geopolitical positions of the two nations at their respective zeniths to discern similarities and differences in their circumstances, commitments, and strengths. It concludes that, due to the USA's formidable power, it possesses a broader array of strategic options than Britain did upon entering a multipolar world. The sixth section analyzes three strategic alternatives available to the U.S.,

contrasting them with the British experience. The final section summarizes the key implications for the USA and concludes.

## Transitions in Theory

### Unipolarity to Multipolarity

The position achieved by the British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was paramount in the international system, just as it has been for the USA over last three decades since the end of the cold war. This predominance is called as a Unipolar global system or a global hegemony. The way power is shared among nations on the international stage is a pivotal aspect of international relations study. This power dynamic is commonly termed the system's polarity. Essentially, there are three primary polarities: unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity. Scholars in the field of unipolarity, like Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, present two closely associated interpretations of the term. The first depicts a unipolar system as one where a single state holds markedly more capabilities than any other. The second implies that in such a system, the security and perhaps other interests of the dominant state aren't fundamentally compromised by any other state. This is similar to a bipolar system, with the exception that only one superpower is a primary threat.<sup>11</sup> (Jervis, "Structural Foundations of Unipolarity") The Cold War period, which set the stage for U.S. global supremacy, was characterized by two principal forces heading security alliances: the U.S. and the USSR. With the USSR's collapse, the U.S. emerged triumphant as the prevailing power in global affairs. The period with these two dominant forces was labeled the bipolar era, followed by the U.S.'s ascension, termed the unipolar era. While multipolarity in geopolitics refers to an international system characterized by multiple dominant state actors wielding significant power, in contrast to a unipolar or bipolar arrangement dominated by one or two major powers respectively. Historically, scholars like Morgenthau (1948) assumed that multipolar systems would be more stable due to the multiplicity of potential alliances<sup>12</sup>. In contrast,

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 188–213, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000070>.

<sup>12</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, [1st ed.]. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1948).

Waltz (1979) asserted that multipolar systems<sup>13</sup>, with their unclear power balances, can result in miscalculations and conflicts. With the ascent of emerging powers like the BRICS nations, as highlighted by Stuenkel (2016), the modern world is inching towards a multipolar era, challenging the traditionally Western-centric international order<sup>14</sup>. This shift, as Ikenberry (2018) suggests, poses challenges for global governance, as diverse powers bring varied interests to the table<sup>15</sup>.

While the concept of polarity compares the powers in the system relative to each other. The concept of hegemony compares their powers in ways they can shape the international system. Hegemony refers to the capacity to establish and enforce international rules and maintain order among nations by upholding these standards. In contrast, a hegemon is a state of such immense power that it overshadows all other states in the system<sup>16</sup>. This situation arises when one state's power is so dominant that it can dictate terms and establish norms for others. Such an overpowering position allows a state to shape conditions favorable to itself, executing these rules through a combination of military prowess and incentives for collaboration<sup>17</sup>. While military might is indispensable for establishing hegemony, it isn't solely about material or physical dominance<sup>18</sup>. The broader mechanisms of economic power—encompassing trade, capital flow, currency, and a regulated international financial system—augment the hegemon's arsenal, providing diverse means to guide and shape behaviors<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley Series in Political Science. (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979).

<sup>14</sup> "Post-Western World and the Rise of a Parallel Order," *Russia in Global Affairs* (blog), accessed August 13, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/post-western-world-and-the-rise-of-a-parallel-order/>.

<sup>15</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>.

<sup>16</sup> Gilpin, "The Nature of International Political Change," 29.

<sup>17</sup> E. D. Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism, 1855-1865* (Cambridge [England] ; Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power*, [New ed.]. (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> David Healy, *US Expansionism; the Imperialist Urge in the 1890s*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970).

## History of Great powers

The examination of the rise and decline of dominant powers is extensively studied. From the epochs of Greece, and Rome, to the more contemporary era of Britain, historians and political scientists have detailed these transitions. However, Paul Kennedy's "The Rise and Fall of Great Powers" stands as the quintessential historical account of the choices made by states as their power fluctuated over the past five centuries. Kennedy presents a compelling case regarding the influence of economic factors on a state's power and the perilous outcomes of overextending international commitments. Kennedy argues that the economic strength of a state is a key factor in its rise and fall. A state's economic power determines its ability to build up its military, expand its territory, and compete with other great powers. However, there is a lag time between a state's economic rise and its military and territorial influence. This is because it takes time to build up a military and acquire territory. As a result, a state's economic power may be declining even as its military and territorial influence is still growing. Great power in relative decline is likely to engage in a security competition with other great powers. This is because the declining power will be trying to maintain its position in the international system. However, this security competition will divert resources away from investment, which will compound the long-term dilemma of declining power. The outcome of major coalition wars for global mastery is strongly correlated with the amount of productive resources mobilized by each side.<sup>20</sup> The book offers an in-depth examination of the of the British Empire and the USA, among other significant powers, and serves as a valuable reference for comparing these two dominant states of their times.

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<sup>20</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Power and Morality Collection at Harvard Business School. (New York, NY: Random House, 1987), xxii–xxiii.



## Great Power Rivalry is Back

"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics" (2001) by Jhon Mearsheimer asserts that the era of great-power rivalry is far from over. The principal nations still harbor apprehensions towards one another, and the specter of dangerous security competition remains imminent. This perspective is grounded in an "offensive realist" framework of global politics: the inherent vulnerability arising from the anarchic nature of the international system compels major powers to adopt aggressive stances towards each other, preempting rivals from accruing influence, even at the risk of conflict. He predicts that with no parallel adversary in Europe or Asia, the United States will retract its security commitments within these regions, leading to the resurgence of great-power security competition and anticipates the imminent cessation of post-Cold War peace among great powers. Mearsheimer's theory rests on five fundamental assumptions. Primarily, the international system exists in an anarchic state, comprising independent states devoid of a higher central authority. Secondly, great powers inherently wield offensive capabilities, granting them the potential to inflict substantial harm and potential destruction upon one another. Thirdly, states perpetually grapple with uncertainty regarding the intentions of other states, rendering any certainty about offensive intentions elusive. Fourthly, the primary goal of major powers centres around survival, preserving territorial sovereignty, and domestic autonomy. Lastly, states are conceived as rational actors, cognizant of their external context, and adept at strategic maneuvering to ensure survival. Mearsheimer's conclusion posits that it is the structure of the international system itself, rather than the intrinsic attributes of individual states, that drives their inclination to seek hegemony.

Mearsheimer proceeds to validate his theory by examining historical trends spanning the last two centuries. He cites instances such as the territorial conquests of Japan and Germany prior to 1945, as well as Soviet policies after 1917, as corroborative evidence. Although the United

States and the United Kingdom deviate somewhat from Mearsheimer's construct, he contends that their "offshore balancing" strategies amount to sophisticated variants of calculated aggression<sup>21</sup>. He argues that the stopping power of large water bodies made both Britain and the USA insular powers which protects them from other great powers but also make it difficult to project military power across the oceans. Therefore, they have acted as balancers of last resort in Europe and Asia<sup>22</sup>.

### Transitions and War

The book "War and Political Change" by Robert Gilpin delves into a series of pivotal inquiries that revolve around the dynamics of international relations and the transformative forces that shape the global landscape. With a keen focus on the interplay of political, economic, and technological developments, Gilpin navigates through the complex terrain of international systems, unraveling the intricate threads that lead to change. The book ventures into the heart of significant questions: What triggers change on the global stage? How do political, economic, and technological factors coalesce to mold the course of international affairs? Moreover, it probes the perilous nexus between intense military conflicts and periods of swift economic and political flux, shedding light on the potential dangers that lurk within such transitions.

Central to the discourse is the profound examination of the applicability of historical lessons to the contemporary world. Gilpin astutely scrutinizes the shifting tides of global interdependence and the advent of nuclear weaponry, juxtaposing them against the backdrop of past insights. This juxtaposition prompts a crucial query: Has the changing landscape,

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<sup>21</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, The Norton Series in World Politics. (New York: Norton, 2001), 264.

<sup>22</sup> Mearsheimer, 238.

defined by increasing economic interconnection and the emergence of new destructive capabilities, shifted the role of conflict and change in international political affairs?

The book's objective is to provide a structured comprehension of international political change. Gilpin's "War and Political Change" abstain from attempting an overarching, universally applicable theory of international relations, choosing instead to offer an intellectual scaffold through which the intricate relationship between warfare and global transformation can be dissected. This analytical framework, while not built on rigorously tested hypotheses, attempts to unravel the complex intricacies of political change through observations of historical experiences. Consequently, "War and Political Change" offers a plausible account of the mechanics that underlie international political change, navigating the blurred boundaries between historical evidence and conceptual generalizations.

The book takes a stance based on the assumption that the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia. International relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy.

### ***Hegemonic war***

Robert Gilpin's perspective on the evolution of global power dynamics is both insightful and historically grounded. He argues that, over the course of history, when an imbalance arises between the structure of the international system and the distribution of power within it, it's usually rectified through what he terms "hegemonic war."<sup>23</sup>

At the heart of a hegemonic war are three core attributes. First, it instigates a direct confrontation between the incumbent world powers and emerging challengers. Such wars are not just territorial disputes; they are foundational battles that question the prevailing order of

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<sup>23</sup> Gilpin, "Hegemonic War and International Change," 197.

things. Second, the essence of these wars centers on the structure and governance of the world system. When the existing order is challenged, the war isn't limited to the battlefield; it spans political, economic, and ideological dimensions. And third, when it comes to the conduct of these wars, they are expansive in their scope and almost unrestrained in their methods. Given what's at stake, nations are rarely reserved, and limitations arise primarily from technological constraints, available resources, and fear of reprisals.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Gilpin identifies certain precursors that typically set the stage for a hegemonic war. First and foremost is the heightened sense of competition among nations. As space and opportunities appear to shrink, international relations increasingly feel like a zero-sum game, where one's gain invariably implies another's loss. Alongside this, there is a palpable sense, both in terms of time and psychology, that a tectonic global shift is in progress. This stirs a certain unease among powerful nations, prompting some to wonder if their days of dominance are numbered, making them more inclined to take aggressive actions while they still have the advantage. And lastly, an ominous undercurrent to all of this is the acknowledgment that events, especially those fueled by the passions of war, can sometimes spiral out of human control. While leaders may strive to act rationally, the unpredictable nature of wartime events can often eclipse calculated decisions.<sup>25</sup>

### Comparing the two hegemons

Comparing Britain and the USA during their paramount positions in the international order is a rarity. The collaborative work "Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846-1914 and United States 1914-2001" by Patrick Karls O'Brien and Armand Clesse explores the vast extents of power held by these two nations. All the authors contributing to the book reach a unanimous conclusion: despite notable differences in the scope and character of power accumulated by

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<sup>24</sup> Gilpin, 199–202.

<sup>25</sup> Gilpin, 202–4.

Britain and the United States during their zeniths, their international behaviors exhibited striking resemblances<sup>26</sup>.

Kori Schake in her book “Safe Passage” studies the transition from British hegemony to American hegemony, which is argued to be the only peaceful transition of power. The study uses key historical moments to explain events that highlight the engagement between two powers. The book centers around nine pivotal events: the Monroe Doctrine, the disputes over the Oregon boundary, the American Civil War, the concept of Manifest Destiny, the monetary crisis in Venezuela, the Spanish-American War, World War I, The Washington Naval Treaties, and World War II. Within each of these instances, Schake delves into the clash from both American and British standpoints, elucidating the actions and strategies of both nations. These events serve as more than historical discussion points for Schake; they act as essential illustrations of the nature of hegemonic shifts. Her primary focus lies in the distinctiveness of the transition from British to American dominance and the remarkable avoidance of armed confrontation in this hegemonic shift. The book extracts four significant insights from the transition of hegemony from Britain to America: firstly, the potential for a peaceful shift of hegemony remains limited even under the most conducive circumstances; secondly, variations in political culture and governmental structure could substantially reduce the likelihood of a peaceful transition from the United States to China; thirdly, a similarity exists between America's current strategic decision with China and the one Great Britain made when dealing with the ascent of America – the notion that compliance with rules can be induced; fourthly, America should anticipate that a hegemonic China will reshape established

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<sup>26</sup> Patrick Karl O'Brien and Armand Clesse, *Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846-1914 and the United States 1941-2001* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2002), [http://bvbr.bib-bvb.de:8991/F?func=serviceetdoc\\_library=BVB01etdoc\\_number=009858605etline\\_number=0001etfunc\\_code=DB\\_RECORDSetservice\\_type=MEDIA](http://bvbr.bib-bvb.de:8991/F?func=serviceetdoc_library=BVB01etdoc_number=009858605etline_number=0001etfunc_code=DB_RECORDSetservice_type=MEDIA).

rules to align with its domestic political culture, mirroring the historical actions of the United States itself.<sup>27</sup>

Aron Friedberg's book, titled "The Weary Titan," delves into Britain's acknowledgment of its diminishing relative power during the turn of the twentieth century and the consequential policy choices that ensued. Within his analysis, Friedberg identifies four distinct aspects of British national power that experienced relative decline: economic, financial, naval, and military capabilities. These facets encompassed Britain's capacity to safeguard its expanding land borders in the latter half of the 19th century, its struggle to balance defense expenses with domestic investments, and its waning control over the global seas.

Friedberg's study reveals a notable contrast between economic predictions and reality. While economists might have anticipated an increase in welfare spending as the empire expanded, the actual outcome was an escalation in defense expenditures. With cultural and political factors of the era in mind, Friedberg examines domestic debates to gain insight into how the British comprehended and addressed their challenges. He argues that due to a lack of domestic cohesion and consensus-building, the British resorted to self-deception regarding the nature and magnitude of the threats they faced.<sup>28</sup>

Given Britain's relative decline as it transitioned into a multipolar world during the late 19th century, Friedberg's book assumes a crucial role as a significant portrayal of the diminishing influence of a once-great power.

The Empire project by Jhon Darwin (2009) offers an intricate portrayal of the ascent and decline of the British empire, along with the extensive global framework it established from

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<sup>27</sup> Kori N. Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 272.

<sup>28</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton University Press, 1988), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1jk0jzw>.

1830 to 1970. Darwin posits that the British world system didn't universally hold non-Western regions under its sway as a global hegemon. Hegemonic dominion eluded British leaders except for specific instances and locations. Nevertheless, the system extended well beyond a mere territorial empire, encompassing a global expanse in its scope.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John Darwin, ed., "Introduction: The Project of an Empire," in *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511635526.002>.

## Walking in Shoes of the Empire

### Epoch of British power (1856-1880)

The pathway of Britain's ascendancy to a position of global preeminence has generated extensive scholarly discussion and divergence of opinions. Economists like Daron Acemoglu attribute the commencement of Britain's rise to the signing of the Magna Carta in the 13th century, which they believe set the foundation for the development of institutions and guided the nation toward its global leadership role<sup>30</sup>. In contrast, political thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama emphasize the crucial impact of the Glorious Revolution in 1688<sup>31</sup>, while historian Paul Kennedy suggests that Britain's pursuit of global influence had its roots a hundred years prior to the end of the Napoleonic wars<sup>32</sup>.

There is, however, a consensus that by 1815, Britain had achieved an unparalleled position of strength. In the wake of war, while other victorious nations grappled with destruction and loss, Britain remained intact, flaunting the most substantial industrial center and an unrivaled naval force in the world<sup>33</sup>. This formidable military strength positioned Britain to spearhead peace talks, culminating in the formation of the Congress of Vienna and the initiation of 'Pax Britannica,' a century marked by relative peace. Britain's supremacy extended further, marked by territorial expansion, an even more powerful navy, and the broadening of its global commercial and financial influence. Over the next hundred years, British Empire reached its pinnacle of absolute power at the end of the first world war. During this period, Britain emerged as the foremost European power, having triumphed over its long-standing adversary, Germany. Concurrently, Russia was undergoing a revolution, while France, Italy, Japan, and

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<sup>30</sup> Daron Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (London: Profile, 2013), 185–200.

<sup>31</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 226.

<sup>33</sup> Kennedy, 151.



the USA emerged as novel allies. Britain's influential role was evident in its leadership during the negotiations of the Treaty of Versailles. Substantial territorial expansions were witnessed across West, Southwest, and East Africa, the Middle East, New Guinea, and the Pacific, marking the zenith of its territorial sway. The empire encompassed a vast expanse, highlighted by an army numbering 8.5 million, 22,000 aircraft, 61 battleships, and 9 battlecruisers. Encompassing approximately 14 million square miles of land, the imperial commonwealth accommodated more than a quarter of the global population. This zenith remains unparalleled by any previous or subsequent empire<sup>34</sup>. (P Kennedy, why did the British Empire last so long)

However, retrospective analysis by historians consistently underscores that the apogee of British power was achieved in the mid-19th century<sup>35</sup>. Despite subsequent endeavors, all subsequent actions by Britain aimed to preserve its influence. Bernard Porter in his book, "The Lion's Share," encapsulates this sentiment succinctly:

*... the real significance of the empire for Britain was that it had cushioned her fall in the world. From 1870 to 1970 the history of Britain was one of steady and almost unbroken decline, economically, militarily and politically, relative to other nations, from the peak of prosperity and power which her industrial revolution had achieved for her in the middle of the nineteenth century. The empire which she had accumulated towards the end of that century, and then lost, was an incident in the course of that decline. It was acquired originally as a result of that decline, to stave it off. It was retained largely in spite of that decline. And it was eventually surrendered as a final confirmation of that decline.*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870-1945: Eight Studies* (London ; Boston: Allen & Unwin in association with Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), 208.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539020>.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A History of British Imperialism 1850 to the Present*, 6th ed. (London: Routledge, 2020), 353–54, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367854508>.

Such assessments rest upon a relative comparison of powers, rather than absolutes. In 1860, Britain reigned as the paramount global power. Boasting the world's mightiest navy, an expansive colonial empire, and the most vibrant economy, Britain's supremacy remained unchallenged. Its dominion encompassed vital ports including Singapore, Aden, the Falkland Islands, Hong Kong, and Lagos, as well as territories colonized by ambitious settlers spanning the South African veldt, Canadian prairies, and Australian outback. Additionally, the burgeoning influence of British societal and commercial pursuits exerted a global impact<sup>37</sup>.

The Royal Navy stood as robust as the combined strength of the next several naval powers, conferring a definitive edge to Britain in potential conflicts. Britain's sprawling colonies granted access to resources and markets, bolstering its economic prowess and cementing its dominance. By 1860, Britain accounted for over half of global manufacturing output, endowing it with a substantial edge in terms of productivity and innovation<sup>38</sup>.

Such dominance allowed Britain to adopt a policy of "splendid isolation"<sup>39</sup> pivoting away from European security concerns in the early 1860s until the turn of the century. This luxury arose from Britain's unassailable naval power, and fortunate geography, rendering it impervious to challenges from other nations or coalitions<sup>40</sup>.

Rooted in multiple factors including naval might, colonial holdings, and economic strength, Britain's preeminence in 1860 was formidable<sup>41</sup>. According to the COW index, a gauge of relative power, Britain commanded a 36 percent share of global power. This marked Britain as the paramount force in the world, evident through its disproportionate energy consumption and iron production, both surpassing those of all other major powers combined. The urban

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<sup>37</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 155.

<sup>38</sup> Kennedy, 155–58.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher H. D. Howard, *Splendid Isolation: A Study of Ideas Concerning Britain's International Position and Foreign Policy during the Later Years of the Third Marquis of Salisbury*. (London: Macmillan, 1967).

<sup>40</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 152.

<sup>41</sup> Kennedy, 153.

population of Britain was also twice the size of France's, the second-largest urban power<sup>42</sup>. This ascendancy bestowed upon Britain a pronounced advantage in terms of economic and political influence. In international affairs, this supremacy afforded Britain the freedom to pursue its interests unchallenged—a phenomenon Christopher Layne characterized as the dominance of British hegemony in a unipolar world<sup>43</sup>.

Between 1860 to 1870 there were changes happening all over the globe. Britain the then hegemon watched the USA fight a civil war, Germany defeat the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1866, and France in 1870, and it watched Japan unite into a revolution in 1868. It isolated itself from all the conflicts and focused on expanding trade and commerce across the globe. After 1870 though things changed again across the globe. As Britain was the status-quo power of the time, It had more to lose than to gain from the fundamental alterations in the global order<sup>44</sup>. By 1870, Russia was well into a decade of industrialization and expansion to the east and the south, USA was done fighting the civil war and was expending large amounts of resources to its new western frontiers, Germany, Japan, and Italy had also started industrializing rapidly. Britain by then had become a model for world power and other rising states wanting to achieve great power status. Paul Kennedy notes that:

*In all three societies, there were impulses to emulate the established powers. By the 1880s and 1890s each was acquiring overseas territories; each, too, began to build a modern fleet to complement its standing army. Each was a significant element in the diplomatic calculus of the age and, at the least by 1902, had become an alliance partner of an older power."*<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> J. David Singer and Paul F. Diehl, *Measuring the Correlates of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993): 21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539020>.

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 226.

<sup>45</sup> Kennedy, 202–3.

## Transition and the Relative Decline

The onset of these changes marked Britain's initial steps towards navigating a multipolar global landscape. Following this shift, the primary goal of the empire was to safeguard its essential interests from rival powers, prompting the growth of its territorial empire. The emphasis on safeguarding trade routes, particularly with Asia and, most crucially, India, became paramount. Concurrently, securing the South Asian expanse of the empire became vital<sup>46</sup>. Consequently, Britain's strategic focus pivoted to addressing the challenges of fortifying its imperial territories.

In 1882, Britain seized control of Egypt to oversee the vital Suez Canal, a central conduit for its trade. Originally intended as a brief campaign, Britain's involvement extended, leading to the annexation of both Egypt and subsequently, Sudan (as a condominium)<sup>47</sup>. Controlling the Nile became crucial for managing these new additions to the empire. As Darwin elucidates in his discussion on territorial expansion dynamics, the aggressive territorial acquisitions post-1880 were more defensive - aimed at preserving existing spheres of influence rather than venturing into uncharted territories<sup>48</sup>.

Up until 1884, only Britain, France, and Portugal held territorial stakes in Africa. However, Germany's declaration of a protectorate over Angra Pequena in March 1884, followed by its successive territorial claims, rapidly solidified its presence in East Africa. Germany's African expansion heightened the anxieties of the established powers, culminating in the frenetic "Scramble for Africa" and the consequent Berlin Conference. The conference, attended by

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<sup>46</sup> Donald Southgate, "Imperial Britain," in *Britain Pre-Eminent: Studies of British World Influence in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. C. J. Bartlett, Problems in Focus Series (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1969), 152–71, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-15292-6\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-15292-6_8).

<sup>47</sup> John Darwin, ed., "The Octopus Power," in *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 64–111, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511635526.004>.

<sup>48</sup> J. Darwin, "Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion," *The English Historical Review* CXII, no. 447 (June 1, 1997): 614–42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/CXII.447.614>.

major European powers and the USA, was primarily a balancing act, aimed at redistributing and solidifying territorial claims<sup>49</sup>. Interestingly, the conference can be seen as an early indication of Britain's emerging relative decline: multiple powers convened to counterbalance and negotiate with a previously dominant Britain regarding African territories.

By the 1890s, Britain encountered formidable rivals across its global strongholds. In the Americas, the US emerged as a competitor. Russia's southern expansion loomed as a threat to British India, while a burgeoning Japan began contesting British dominance in key Pacific ports.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the linchpin of the empire's security was British dominance in the prevailing military technology of the time - naval power. The Royal Navy's unparalleled command over global waters essentially assured the protection of Britain's island territories. Given that potential adversaries had only restricted capabilities to extend their military influence over territories by land, Britain's naval supremacy was more than adequate to safeguard its vast mainland colonies and bolster its stakes in the European continent. This naval dominance not only acted as a deterrent against adversaries but also instilled confidence among its dependents. Moreover, in times of conflict, it proved to be an invaluable asset. Impressively, this strategic advantage was maintained without exorbitant expenditures<sup>50</sup>.

By the dawn of the new century, Britain faced mounting challenges in upholding its longstanding maritime strategy. The surge in the naval strength of foreign powers, combined with the sprawling development of railroad networks throughout Europe, North America, and

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<sup>49</sup> Wang Shih-tsung and 王世宗, "The Conference of Berlin and British 'New' Imperialism, 1884-85," report (臺北市 : 國立臺灣大學歷史學系暨研究所, July 31, 1998), <https://scholars.lib.ntu.edu.tw/handle/123456789/4678>.

<sup>50</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, "Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline," in *The Weary Titan, Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1jk0jzw.12>.

into Asia, began undermining Britain's maritime stronghold. It was no longer sufficient for Britain to merely control European waters to assert dominance over the world's oceans. As the British Empire expanded its territorial reach, and with other global powers asserting their presence, Britain became increasingly susceptible to attacks from the land. Consequently, there was a pressing need for Britain to either maintain substantial ground forces or have the capability to rapidly scale up its army, not just to protect its colonies but also to assert its influence within Europe<sup>51</sup>.

At the dawn of the 19th century, British statesmen found themselves entangled in a complex web of global diplomatic and strategic concerns. In 1895 alone, they grappled with issues ranging from the potential fragmentation of China after the Sino-Japanese war and the possible dissolution of the Ottoman Empire due to the Armenian crisis. They also faced tensions with Germany over Southern Africa, disputes with the United States regarding the Venezuela-Guinea borders, concerns over a French military expedition in Equatorial Africa, and the perceived threat of a Russian push towards the Hindu Kush<sup>52</sup>.

In terms of naval power, even with consistent budget increases for the Royal Navy, maintaining dominance became increasingly difficult. The maritime landscape had evolved from the mid-century, and the Royal Navy now faced multiple burgeoning foreign fleets by the 1890s. While the navy could counteract American naval forces in the western hemisphere, it necessitated diverting warships from European waters. Similarly, reinforcing naval presence in the Far East meant depleting the strength of squadrons in the Mediterranean<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, "Land Power: The Dilemma of Indian Defense," in *The Weary Titan, Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 209–78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1jk0jzw.10>.

<sup>52</sup> J. A. S. Grenville, *Lord Salisbury and Foreign Policy: The Close of the Nineteenth Century.*, University of London Historical Studies, 14 (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1964).

<sup>53</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 227.

Of all these challenges, however, the most pressing challenge was posed by Germany's naval expansionism. Germany's decision to build a battle fleet was seen as a direct threat to Britain's naval supremacy. Britain tried to negotiate with Germany to reach a compromise on the naval arms race, but these negotiations were unsuccessful. Both British and German authorities viewed the naval competition between the two as central to their primary security and the destiny of the European political framework. Neither could afford to make concessions, wary of jeopardizing their security by relying on the other. (R Gilpin, pg 208) As a result, Britain was forced to retrench its power and commitments around the globe in order to concentrate its efforts on the German challenge. Britain settled its differences with its other foreign rivals one after another. Given the threats it faced from the US Navy which was increasing its strength. Further, the US was pressing for a canal in central America, which would link its eastern and western portions of the fleet profoundly affecting the balance of sea power in the Atlantic and the Pacific in the USA's favor. Therefore, for Britain to maintain superiority on the Atlantic coast it either had to redistribute its forces from Asia or undertake an even larger naval built up of its own or give in to the USA. The notion of resisting the rise of American power was briefly considered but swiftly dismissed. When the admiralty was questioned in 1901 about the viability of waging war against the USA, they responded unequivocally that dominating the American waters would be feasible only if the neutrality of European nations was guaranteed.<sup>54</sup> In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain agreed to the American desire to have primacy in the Caribbean Sea. There were strategic, economic, and ideological reasons for this decision<sup>55</sup>. This ended a century of

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<sup>54</sup> Correlli Barnett, *The Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities, 1945-1950* (Macmillan, 1995), 250–51.

<sup>55</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, "Sea Power: The Surrender of Worldwide Supremacy," in *The Weary Titan, Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 164–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1jk0jzw.9>.

uneasiness between the two countries and laid the foundation for the Anglo-American alliance that would prevail in two world wars.

At the onset of the 20th century, Britain faced a strategic crossroads, grappling with emerging global challenges. Friedman's analysis outlines that post-1901, British leaders decided to shift their focus from global supremacy to more manageable European sea control. The decision to placate the United States in 1901 signaled this change and was likely unavoidable given America's potential and Canada's vulnerability, although it may not have seemed entirely confident at the time<sup>56</sup>.

Following this strategic shift, Britain entered into an alliance with Japan in 1902. This partnership granted Japan supremacy in the northwestern Pacific and allowed Britain to withdraw from the Far East. It enabled Britain to realign its focus on European waters without conceding its global maritime control, particularly considering the evolving global landscape, such as Russia's defeat by Japan and improved relations with France<sup>57</sup>.

The next major move came in 1904 with the signing of the Entente Cordiale with France. This agreement resolved longstanding territorial disputes, settling the Mediterranean and colonial confrontations, and allowed Britain to further focus on the German challenge. British policymakers recognized the need to bolster military capabilities to counter Germany's rise. However, instead of facing potential domestic political backlash, they opted for alliance-building and deterrence, deepening ties with France to solidify the partnership and deter Germany<sup>58</sup>.

As the decade progressed, Britain's leadership sought to balance domestic social spending with the empire's security needs. Recognizing the limitations of resources, they began to use

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<sup>56</sup> O'Brien and Clesse, *Two Hegemonies*, 134–35.

<sup>57</sup> Friedberg, "Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline," 301.

<sup>58</sup> Friedberg, 301.



diplomacy, appeasement, and optimism to diminish perceived threats and conserve defense budgets. This approach allowed Britain to maintain its global posture without sacrificing domestic development. However, it eventually led to overextension and left Britain with numerous commitments and vulnerabilities it was ill-equipped to handle. This balancing act, although appearing feasible, had inherent weaknesses that exposed the nation to potential risks<sup>59</sup>.

### Changing Circumstances, Changing Objectives, Changing Strategies

As Britain rose to prominence and subsequently experienced a relative decline, it became evident that it reshaped its strategies, to fit its evolving objectives under altered circumstances. Initially embracing an isolationist stance in the 1860s, Britain shifted gears and formed alliances with four significant powers within just forty years. Its goals transitioned from merely protecting its primary interests against adversaries to actively challenging them to preserve the balance of power.

In its quest to safeguard its existing key interests, Britain found itself in a cycle where safeguarding old interests led to the creation of new ones, necessitating even more resources. To address these escalating demands, Britain faced a dilemma: either broaden its resource pool, a challenging feat given the rapid growth of rival powers or divert existing domestic resources. However, reallocating from domestic needs heightened tensions internally, leading to discussions of imperial overreach and prompting a domestic reevaluation of the costs of maintaining global dominance.

Britain then had to weigh its options: bear increasing security costs, potentially inciting domestic unrest; reassess its core interests, potentially losing dominance in certain regions; or

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<sup>59</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, "Strategy versus Finance in Twentieth-Century Great Britain," *The International History Review* 3, no. 1 (1981): 44–61.

cut security expenses. The last option often meant forging alliances with regional powers<sup>60</sup>. However, this approach intensified global competition as it feeds into the security dilemma of other nations who viewed these alliances as potential threats, escalating their own insecurities and leading them to form competing alliances<sup>61</sup>.

Despite its varied strategies — expansion, containment, retrenchment, appeasement, and alliances — aimed at averting major conflict, Britain inevitably found itself embroiled in war in 1914. The intricate web of alliances that had developed in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries dragged all major powers into a conflict initially sparked by a dispute between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia.

Figure 1 illustrates the complex decision-making process of the British Empire as it navigated the turbulent waters of great power competition, reflecting a time of constant adaptation and reevaluation in response to changing circumstances.

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<sup>60</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): n. For detailed discussion on decision to form alliances, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540>.

<sup>61</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 461–95, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010183>.

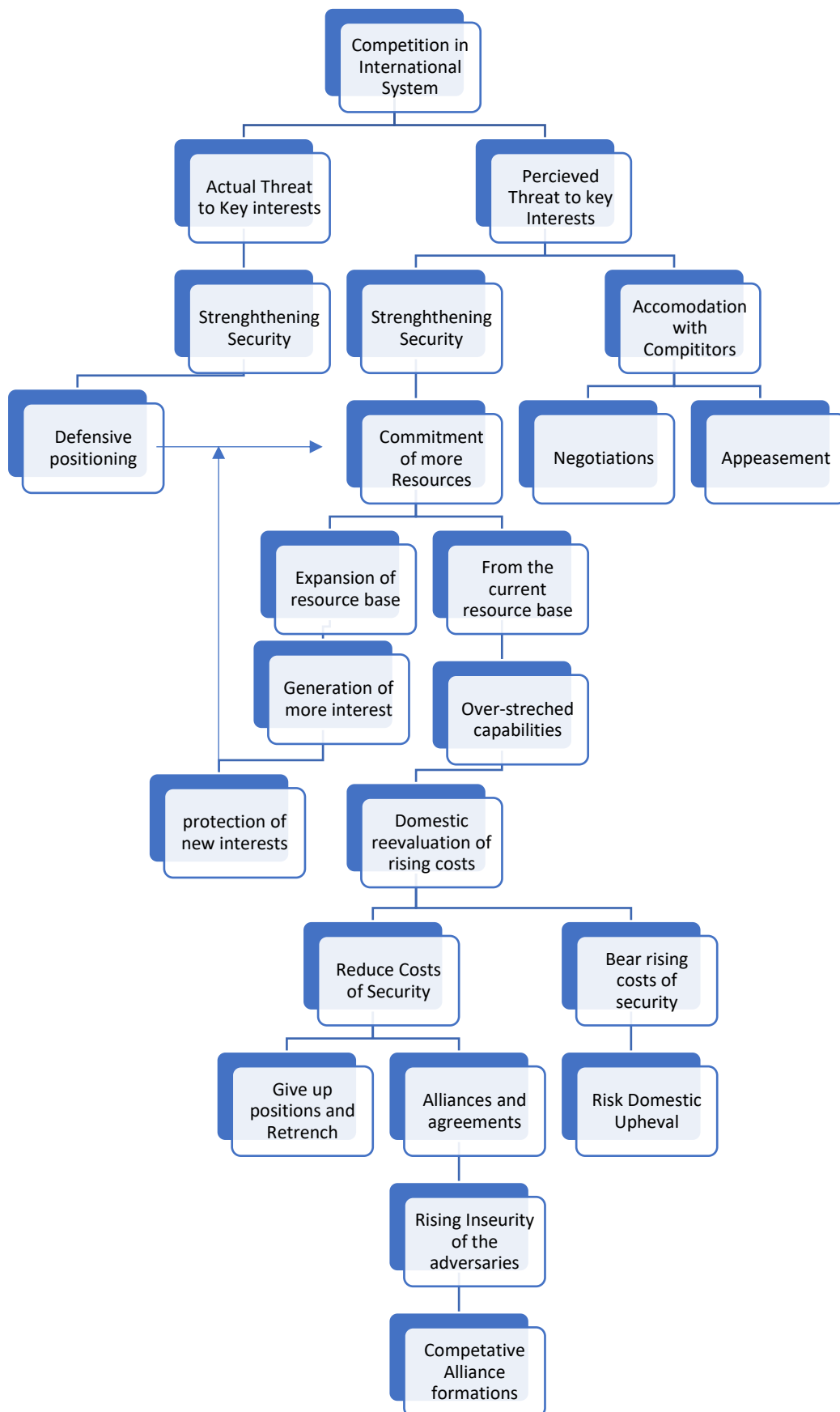


Figure 1: British Security Conundrum

## The American Order

### America's Power Story (1945-2008)

Following the Second World War, the USA emerged as the preeminent global power. Driven by significant wartime spending, its Gross National Product reached \$136 billion by 1945. The nation saw a remarkable increase in its industrial output, growing by over 15% during the wartime years. Uniquely among the major powers, the war acted as an economic catalyst for the USA, making it richer rather than depleting its resources. This robust economic foundation was mirrored in its formidable military might: by the war's end, the US had mobilized 12.5 million personnel, operated over 1,200 major warships, a fleet of numerous aircraft carriers, and commanded an arsenal of more than 2,000 heavy bombers. Most significantly, the USA held a unique distinction – it was the only nation armed with the atomic bomb, the era's most potent weapon. In contrast, other major powers were left ravaged by the war, with none possessing the strategic advantage of nuclear capability. As Paul Kennedy observed, with the decline of traditional powers, the USA naturally expanded to fill the void. Once it achieved this unparalleled status, the country could no longer confine its influence merely within its own borders or even its hemisphere<sup>62</sup>. This confluence of factors bestowed upon the USA an unparalleled economic and strategic dominance.<sup>63</sup> This period marked the first period of unipolarity in global geopolitics<sup>64</sup>.

After the conclusion of the Second World War, the USA embarked on an ambitious mission to shape a new global order that would align with the interests of Western capitalism.

Recognizing the widespread devastation caused by the war, the country initiated a series of financial aid programs through newly established institutions like the International Monetary

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<sup>62</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 359.

<sup>63</sup> Kennedy, n. All figures from the book at pg 358.

<sup>64</sup> Layne, "This Time It's Real."

Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development in 1945, followed by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1947.<sup>65</sup>

Determined to prevent another major conflict, the USA also assumed a leadership role in founding the United Nations, an organization that continues to exert significant authority on the world stage. Additionally, spurred by concerns over increasing Soviet influence in Europe, the USA launched the Marshall Plan, providing crucial financial support to European nations.

During this transformative period, the USA's expansion of economic influence went hand in hand with the strategic establishment of military bases and security agreements worldwide. This era was marked by intense rivalry between the USA and the USSR, primarily over the fate of Europe. In response to this threat, the USA developed a strategy of containment, aiming to halt the spread of communism and Soviet influence beyond Eastern and Central Europe<sup>66</sup>.

This strategic alignment culminated in the formation of NATO in 1949, initially composed of 12 member nations. Subsequent security treaties with countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines reinforced this network of alliances<sup>67</sup>. The acquisition of atomic capabilities by the USSR in 1949 marked the onset of a bipolar international order that would persist for over four decades, characterizing the Cold War era. During this time, the two superpowers were engaged in relentless security competition, each maneuvering to maintain or expand its sphere of influence.

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<sup>65</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 360.

<sup>66</sup> Kennedy, 376.

<sup>67</sup> "Timeline of NATO Expansion since 1949," AP News, May 10, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-world-war-ii-sweden-finland-240d97572cc783b2c7ff6e7122dd72d2>.

It was only after the USSR suddenly collapsed in 1989 that the USA emerged as the sole superpower. Charles Krauthammer called this post-cold war order the unipolar moment and pointed out that “American pre-eminence is based on the fact that it is the only country with the military, diplomatic, political, and economic assets to be a decisive player in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses to involve itself”<sup>68</sup>.

In this era, the USA became the leader of the liberal international order. It unilaterally took military intervention against Iraq in 1990, in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. It took the lead in interventions through the UN and NATO in Somalia and Serbia respectively.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the Pentagon's Regional Defense Strategy in the 1990s and the creation of the Base Force were grounded in the principle of selective engagement<sup>69</sup>.

Throughout the 1990s and subsequent years, the nation experienced an unprecedented concentration of power, unparalleled in historical precedent. Its economic prowess exceeded that of its nearest counterpart by a substantial 40 percent, and its defense expenditures eclipsed the collective outlay of the subsequent six nations by an impressive six-fold margin. The absence of overt security threats diminished the impetus for assuming a proactive role in resolving global challenges. While the majority of the American populace acknowledged the impracticability of isolationism within a technologically interconnected world reliant on economic interdependence, a historical trajectory marked by substantial Cold War engagements and expenditures over four decades engendered a yearning for a return to a state of normalcy. This sentiment, translated into a desire for respite from the exigencies of global leadership and an emphasis on domestic preoccupations. Public endorsement for foreign

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<sup>68</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990): 23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20044692>.

<sup>69</sup> F.G. Hoffman, “Forward Partnership: A Sustainable American Strategy,” *Orbis* 57, no. 1 (December 2013): 20–40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2012.10.003>.

policy initiatives waned, and the vacillating tenor of public sentiment contributed to a waning interest in international affairs. This sentiment was mirrored and shaped by the media, which notably curtailed its coverage of global events. Foreseeing a forthcoming "peace dividend," the legislative body substantially curbed appropriations for foreign aid, overseas diplomatic missions, and international informational propagation<sup>70</sup>.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the USA faced a direct attack on its homeland for the first time. The attack of 9/11 started the USA's war against terrorism. Following the 9/11 attacks, the US military swiftly overcame Afghan forces and ousted its government in a mere two months, underscoring its unparalleled military capabilities. In a similar vein, the US overpowered Saddam Hussein's army in Iraq within a matter of weeks. This display of American strength in the early 2000s likely deterred other nations from harboring ambitions to develop weapons of mass destruction. Citing the 2007 national intelligence estimate, there were indications that Iran paused its military-focused nuclear endeavors, Libya's Moammar Qaddafi abandoned his nuclear aspirations, and, influenced by China, North Korea started talks regarding its nuclear goals in 2003<sup>71</sup>. These events illuminated the US's capability to address a strategic landscape shadowed by the potential spread of WMDs. Concurrently, the Washington consensus had paved the way for the USA's penetration into various emerging economies. By the onset of the new millennium, the USA stood uncontested as the vanguard of globalization. Another dimension of US dominance was its "soft power," a concept highlighted by Joseph Nye. American cultural and political ideals echoed worldwide, with US pop culture gaining significant traction<sup>72</sup>. In a 2002 article titled 'Eagle has Landed' in the Financial Times, Paul

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<sup>70</sup> Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 921.

<sup>71</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, "Afterword to the 2010 Edition," in *The Weary Titan, Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 301, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1jk0jzw.13>.

<sup>72</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2002), 11.

Kennedy emphasized the USA's unparalleled global standing, noting the historic extent of its dominance<sup>73</sup>.

An additional facet of the USA's power was its steadily expanding security obligations within NATO. The security alliance, led by the USA, encompassed 16 members in 1991. By the year 2000, this number increased to 19, and in 2004, an additional 7 countries from the former USSR bloc joined the alliance. As of 2020, the alliance had extended its security umbrella to include 30 member nations<sup>74</sup>.

Experts highlight the inherent peace in American unipolarity. William Wohlforth asserts that the significant power gap between the US and other nations naturally reduces power struggles, fostering global peace. Without a real competitor, the US had no direct challenges, and nations avoided actions that might upset the dominant power. The US's ability to maintain key security bodies, like NATO, further mediated regional tensions. Lesser powers, recognizing the costs of opposition, often chose alignment with the US, bolstering the stability of a unipolar world<sup>75</sup>.

Although the era of Unipolarity brought about a relatively peaceful international environment, according to Nuno Monteiro's analysis in 2012, the United States has been engaged in warfare for thirteen out of the twenty-two years following the Cold War's conclusion<sup>76</sup>. To put it differently, the initial two decades of unipolarity, constituting less than 10 percent of U.S. history, account for over 25 percent of the nation's cumulative wartime involvement. Additionally, Toft and Kushi (2022) observe, through novel data from the Military Intervention Project (MIP), that U.S. military interventions notably escalated in

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<sup>73</sup> Paul Kennedy, "The Eagle Has Landed," *FT.Com*, January 31, 2002, N/A.

<sup>74</sup> "Timeline of NATO Expansion since 1949."

<sup>75</sup> "The Stability of a Unipolar World," 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Nuno P. Monteiro, "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (January 2012): 9–40, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00064](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00064).



frequency post-1989. They conclude that while the unipolar era possibly fostered a relatively stable international system, it concurrently spurred the United States into a growing number of militarized conflicts.

During the era of unipolarity, the United States faced the unique challenge of being the unrivaled global leader. Despite internal calls for isolationism, its entwined role in the world economy and politics prevented total withdrawal from international affairs. Initially reluctant, the USA adopted selective engagement and later flexed its military and ideological muscles worldwide. As domestic pressures mounted against international involvement, the USA became a more reluctant leader. Though it still commands a preeminent military, strong economy, and cultural influence, challenges to its global dominance are emerging for the first time in three decades. This sets the stage for debates about America's potential relative decline and loss of its unparalleled position.

### Questionable Decline of the USA

The conversation about the USA's relative decline began long before the onset of the unipolar era. In 1987, Paul Kennedy's influential "The Rise and Fall of Great Powers" stirred intense debates on this subject<sup>77</sup>. He suggested that the USA had been trapped by its own imperial ambitions, misallocating crucial resources and hampering economic progress<sup>78</sup>. Samuel Huntington, in his 1989 piece "The US Decline or Renewal?", pinpointed four distinct periods of pessimism towards the USA post-World War II. The initial concern, in the late 1950s, was the USA's lag behind the USSR in the space race and GNP growth. By the late 1960s, the aftermath of the Vietnam War brought about a second wave of doubt regarding America's global stature. 1973's OPEC oil embargo heralded a third wave, as it intensified

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<sup>77</sup> Layne, "This Time It's Real."

<sup>78</sup> Layne.

decline sentiments by stunting growth and amplifying inflation<sup>79</sup>. A subsequent economic crisis following the Iranian revolution, combined with the Soviet Union's expanding military ambitions, constituted a fourth wave, challenging the USA's position. After the Cold War, these debates momentarily subsided due to events like Japan's economic downturn, Europe's stagnation, and the USA's IT-driven economic boost<sup>80</sup>.

The debate was rekindled after the 2008 financial crisis. Christopher Layne's 2012 argument posited the end of the unipolar era of US dominance, highlighting reasons such as the rise of other powers, notably China, and mounting fiscal challenges stemming from escalating debt, fiscal deficits, and the dollar's uncertainty. Concurrently, predictions concerning China's economic ascendancy gained momentum<sup>81</sup>. Goldman Sachs projected China to surpass the USA as the world's largest economy in 2028, whereas other sources like The Economist Intelligence Unit (2009), Price Waterhouse Coopers (2010)<sup>82</sup>, and The Economist magazine (2010) speculated various dates. A 2011 International Monetary Fund study even envisaged China overtaking the USA in terms of purchasing power parity by 2016, though as of 2023, the USA still retains its position as the largest economy.

In the realm of security, the USA's decision to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan raised queries about its credibility and capability to engage in prolonged conflicts<sup>83</sup>. But one may ask if the decision to abandon active military engagement in the middle east and Central Asia was a calculated one in response to the rising acknowledgment of inevitable great power competition with Russia and China. Furthermore, Russia's 2022 incursion into Ukraine

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<sup>79</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The U.S.: Decline or Renewal?," *Foreign Affairs* 67, no. 2 (1988): 76–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20043774>.

<sup>80</sup> Friedberg, "Afterword to the 2010 Edition," 308.

<sup>81</sup> Layne, "This Time It's Real."

<sup>82</sup> "Shift in World Economic Power Means a Decade of Seismic Change - Press Room," accessed August 9, 2023, [https://pwc.blogs.com/press\\_room/2010/01/shift-in-world-economic-power-means-a-decade-of-seismic-change.html](https://pwc.blogs.com/press_room/2010/01/shift-in-world-economic-power-means-a-decade-of-seismic-change.html).

<sup>83</sup> Joshua D. Kertzer, "American Credibility After Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-09-02/american-credibility-after-afghanistan>.

illustrated that the USA no longer holds exclusive unilateral decision-making power in international politics<sup>84</sup>.

When evaluating power in terms of its capacity to shape outcomes, one can argue that the USA has undergone a relative decline in the last decade<sup>85</sup>. It is because the USA holds the position of a status quo power that it has more to lose than to gain from shifts in the international system<sup>87</sup>. Despite this, the USA retains its status as the largest economy, upholds a highly advanced military, and maintains its powerful alliances<sup>88</sup>. However, concerns about this decline aren't entirely unfounded. The 2021 report by the US Department of Defense on *Military and Security Development Involving the People's Republic of China* underscores the necessity of addressing the growing challenge posed by China's increasingly capable military and global aspirations. The report specifically highlights the PLA's intent to establish a force proficient in executing joint long-range precision strikes across various domains, enhancing its sophisticated capabilities in space, counter space, and cyber domains, and accelerating the expansion of its nuclear capabilities<sup>89</sup>. These developments are poised to engage the USA in a security rivalry with China, which could strain fiscal resilience and the broader economy<sup>90</sup>.

Reflecting on previous debates about American declinism, it would be imprudent to bet against the resilience and adaptability of the American system. However, it would also be an

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<sup>84</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity," *Foreign Affairs*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-multipolarity-myth>.

<sup>85</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro and Derek Scissors, "China Hasn't Reached the Peak of Its Power," *Foreign Affairs*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-hasnt-reached-peak-its-power>.

<sup>86</sup> Ryan Hass and Jude Blanchette, "Central Questions in U.S.-China Relations amid Global Turbulence," July 21, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/central-questions-us-china-relations-amid-global-turbulence>.

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Layne, "The US–Chinese Power Shift and the End of the Pax Americana," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 89–111, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix249>.

<sup>88</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity," *Foreign Affairs*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-multipolarity-myth>.

<sup>89</sup> "Military and Security Development Involving the People's Republic of China" (Department of Defence, 2021).

<sup>90</sup> "Investing in Great-Power Competition," accessed August 9, 2023, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/investing-in-great-power-competition>.

oversight to assume that these attributes will endure indefinitely and without exertion amidst the experience of relative decline<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>91</sup> Friedberg, "Afterword to the 2010 Edition," 318.

## Pax Britannica vs. Pax Americana: A Comparative Analysis

### *Similarities:*

1. **Entangling Influence:** The post-1815 British found their informal influence across various territories solidifying into a more formal and complex bond, a situation mirrored by the Americans post-World War II. Whenever either power tried to set boundaries, they were confronted with new challenges and vulnerabilities<sup>92</sup>.
2. **Artificial Power Peaks:** Both superpowers saw heightened influence primarily because of the vulnerability and exhaustion of other nations. The world, ravaged by war or still grappling with colonial underdevelopment, made powers like Britain post-1815 and America post-1945 appear more dominant than they might have in a more competitive environment<sup>93</sup>.
3. **Military Budgetary Restraints:** Both nations, during their respective eras of dominance, slashed military budgets. The long periods of peace they ushered in enabled such reductions<sup>94,95</sup>.

### *Differences:*

1. **Strategic Alliances:** After the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Britain primarily refrained from forging extensive, binding alliances with other sovereign nations. Their strategic focus was more on ensuring the security of their vast colonial empire and trade pathways. In contrast, post-World War II America engaged heavily in numerous alliances, intertwining itself deeply into global geopolitics<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>92</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 359.

<sup>93</sup> Kennedy, 357.

<sup>94</sup> Kennedy, 155.

<sup>95</sup> Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*.

<sup>96</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 360.

2. **Military Might:** The Pax Britannica was executed with prudence; Britain's army was considerably smaller compared to its European counterparts. Even the formidable Royal Navy was merely equivalent to the combined might of the subsequent two largest navies. On the other hand, during the era of American dominance, no global naval force could rival the U.S.'s maritime supremacy<sup>97</sup>. While Britain's economic stature between 1815-1880 didn't directly translate into military prowess, America's military superiority was evident since the close of the second world war<sup>98</sup>.
3. **Weapons and Warfare:** From 1815 to 1914, Industrial Britain positioned itself as a significant supplier of advanced military arms and equipment, though it was hardly a primary supplier of advanced weapons and equipment<sup>99</sup>. In stark contrast, the United States led the world in arms exports, responsible for 40% of global weapons sales between 2018-2022<sup>100</sup>. Additionally, the U.S. has a nuclear arsenal that provides unparalleled deterrence and defense against threats — a level of power that Britain never achieved in its prime<sup>101</sup>.
4. **Economic and Political Aspirations:** Historically, Britain maintained a balanced budget during peacetime and never genuinely aimed for hegemonic status<sup>102</sup>. In contrast, U.S. hegemony was actively projected via an intricate web of military alliances, while Britain typically acted solo during its dominion<sup>103</sup>.

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<sup>97</sup> Kennedy, "The Eagle Has Landed."

<sup>98</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 153.

<sup>99</sup> Kalevi J. Holsti, ed., "CONFLICT AND CONSENT, 1815–1914," in *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648–1989*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 138–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511628290.008>.

<sup>100</sup> Pieter D Wezeman, Justine Gadon, and Siemon T Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022," 2022.

<sup>101</sup> O'Brien and Clesse, *Two Hegemonies*, 46.

<sup>102</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 380.

<sup>103</sup> O'Brien and Clesse, *Two Hegemonies*, 132.

Table 1

Parameters	Similarities	Differences
International System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rise of new powers after a prolonged period of international dominance.</li> <li>• The system remained largely anarchic during both periods.</li> <li>• No great power wars</li> </ul>	<p>While in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the international system had fewer platforms to engage diplomatically. The international system created under the USA's leadership provides a vast array of institutions to discuss issues of statecraft between nations.</p>
Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both had global influence through their security and economic commitments.</li> <li>• Influence was challenged globally by rising powers.</li> <li>• Many regions remained to be contested for influence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Britain for the most part avoided military alliance with other international power and maintained its empire under its command.</li> <li>• USA maintains a large and complex web of military alliances and partnerships.</li> </ul>

<p>Predominant Military technology</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both nations maintained a significant lead in the dominant military technology of the time. British Navy and American Nuclear Arsenal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Even though Britain's advantage was limited to naval technology. The USA maintains a clear advantage in all forms of Military technology including Land, Air, Space, and Cyber.</li> </ul>
<p>Security expenditure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security expenditures were cut with the advent of peace.</li> <li>• Domestic pressures continue to push for a reduction in defense expenditure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Britain never had excessive security expenditures or a lead over defense expenditures over other powers.</li> <li>• USA has maintained a massive lead over others in defense expenditure</li> </ul>

In summary, while both Pax Britannica and Pax Americana represent periods of significant geopolitical dominance, the manner in which each power achieved and maintained its influence varied substantially. The British Empire leaned more towards informal influence and strategic partnerships, while the U.S. actively wove a complex structure of military



alliances and showcased an unmatched military presence globally. The immense strength of the US provides it with a variety of strategic avenues to uphold its supremacy and the global system it has crafted. However, this also implies that any shortcomings in sustaining this order could come at a steep price for the US. Considering the breadth of its obligations and the diverse locations of its foes, the US will need tailored military strategies for different regions and opponents. The following section delves into the potential strategic paths open to the US and compares them with the British experience.

## Strategic Options for Future

In the face of rising great powers and significant threats to the international system established by the USA, it is important that the USA take strategic action which would ensure the protection of its interests and maintain its influence in the international system as new powers rise<sup>104</sup>. The most prominent strategy options available for the USA are strategic restraint, Offshore balancing, selective engagement, assertive intervention, and forward partnering.

### **Strategic Restraint (Barry Posen)**

#### **Goals:**

The strategy of restraint, as articulated by Barry Posen, emphasizes a more nuanced approach to global affairs. The central objective is for the United States to find ways to subtly guide the trajectory of international politics, instead of overtly controlling or dominating it<sup>105</sup>.

#### **Assumptions**

The U.S., given its present circumstances, is in a position of unparalleled strength. It faces no immediate threats that jeopardize its sovereignty. There's an absence of a looming shadow of conquest or coercion from any entity more formidable. Furthermore, the nation's territorial boundaries are unassailable. Such an impregnable power position, which lets the U.S. even contemplate taking the reins of global leadership, testifies to its formidable defense capabilities.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> "Making America Grand Again: Toward a New Grand Strategy," accessed August 9, 2023, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/making-america-grand-again-toward-a-new-grand-strategy>.

<sup>105</sup> Barry R. Posen, "The Case for Restraint," *The American Interest* (blog), November 1, 2007, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2007/11/01/the-case-for-restraint/>.

<sup>106</sup> Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt5hh0db>.

## **Strategic Implications**

Posen advises that the United States ought to exercise more restraint when considering military action and show moderation in their goals regarding political transformations, both internally and in inter-state affairs. Additionally, he suggests a significant pullback, both politically and militarily, from longtime allies. If the influence of a regional power grows to a level that it becomes a threat to its neighbors or the U.S., local forces should be anticipated to resist that growth. While the U.S. must retain the ability to intervene when essential, there should be a distinct hesitancy to do so. Before the U.S. takes action, regional players should harness their resources and devise plans. The U.S.'s significant presence in the seas, skies, and space makes such interventions possible. However, combined with its advantageous geographical location, it provides the U.S. a buffer. This overarching advantage acts as a safeguard, promoting a sense of global stability<sup>107</sup>.

## **Limitations**

Toft and Khushi posit that the strategy of restraint, though theoretically appealing, may be fraught with perils in actual execution. Given that it hinges on perpetually fine-tuning reactions across an intricate web of regional security dynamics, the operational demands of restraint could potentially surpass those of straightforward isolationism or habitual interventionism. For the U.S. to enact a policy centered on restraint, there would be an unwavering need for an adept cadre of political, diplomatic, military, and intelligence leadership – a condition that isn't guaranteed.

Hoffman, on the other hand, contends that restraint could inadvertently embolden potential adversaries to act impulsively, thereby giving rise to more volatile situations rather than defusing them. Although this approach might be economical, yielding significant savings

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<sup>107</sup> Posen, 69–134.

from downsizing forward-based forces and a leaner military framework, it comes at the cost of diminishing U.S. global leadership and its reassuring presence on the world stage. There's a risk that restraint might be misinterpreted as the U.S. receding from its leadership role, potentially causing greater global unrest. Moreover, this strategy doesn't adequately address the U.S.'s role in tackling global concerns like the spread of weapons of mass destruction and other security threats that not only impact the U.S. but also its allies and partners<sup>108</sup>.

### **Offshore Balancing (Mearsheimer, Walt)**

#### **Goals of Offshore Balancing:**

Offshore balancing emerges as an appealing alternative to the often costly and interventionist stance of the U.S. on the global stage. At its core, this strategy endeavors to preserve and bolster U.S. power and security without delving into an expansive or aggressive grand strategy. It envisions a world where the U.S. retains its dominant position but treads with caution and judiciousness. The strategy dictates that the U.S. must always be prepared to intervene but should do so sparingly, and, when intervention becomes a necessity, it should lean heavily on its allies to take the lead in regional conflicts. Once stability is achieved, the U.S. strategy would be to retreat and allow regional dynamics to resume<sup>109</sup>.

#### **Underlying Assumptions:**

The foundation of offshore balancing is built on a set of key assumptions. It recognizes and accepts the realities of multi-polarity, regional competition, and inherent geopolitical instability<sup>110</sup>. The vast oceans, which historically have acted as buffers, are believed to keep distant threats at bay, safeguarding the U.S. mainland. However, the strategy is not one of

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<sup>108</sup> Hoffman, "Forward Partnership."

<sup>109</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing," *Foreign Affairs*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>.

<sup>110</sup> Christopher Layne, "Offshore Balancing Revisited," *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (June 1, 2002): 233–48, <https://doi.org/10.1162/01636600252820252>.

isolation. Advocates argue that regions outside the Western Hemisphere, specifically Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf, hold strategic importance for the U.S. The primary concern in these regions revolves around the rise of regional hegemons, which could disrupt global equilibrium. Furthermore, offshore balancing rests on the belief that regional powers, given the right circumstances and incentives, can and will stabilize their respective regions without undermining U.S. allies or broader interests<sup>111</sup>.

### **Perceived Advantages:**

Offshore balancing, as a strategy, offers several alluring advantages. Central to its appeal is the prospect of sidestepping unnecessary global entanglements, ensuring that the U.S. engages only when its core interests are at stake. By renouncing the quest for global hegemony and maintaining regional hegemony, the need for a pervasive military presence is diminished. This approach promises a more judicious use of the nation's resources, channeling them towards clearly defined U.S. interests. Additionally, by strategically deferring to regional powers, the U.S. stands to benefit from their capabilities and intricate local relationships, potentially leading to more organic and enduring regional stability.

### **Inherent Limitations:**

While offshore balancing presents a compelling case, it is not without its challenges. One major hurdle is the so-called 'tyranny of distance.' The effectiveness of the strategy is closely tied to how far "offshore" the U.S. positions itself, with increasing distances potentially complicating rapid response mechanisms. Influence and power projection from afar come with their own sets of complications, as Robert Kagan's insights suggest<sup>112</sup>. The inherent assumption that U.S. forces can seamlessly re-enter key regions during crises, especially after

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<sup>111</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 41.

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/author/robert-kagan>, "The Price of Power," Washington Examiner, January 24, 2011, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/the-price-of-power-533695>.

prolonged absences, might be more intricate and cost-intensive than anticipated<sup>113</sup>. Moreover, a decrease in military ties might inadvertently erode U.S. credibility, trustworthiness, and influence<sup>114</sup><sup>115</sup>. Lastly, while the strategy promises economic relief through cost savings, the actual fiscal benefits, when compared to federal deficits, might be less impactful than projected<sup>116</sup>.

In essence, while offshore balancing offers a recalibrated approach to U.S. foreign policy, it demands meticulous implementation to navigate its complexities and potential pitfalls and therefore prudent political, diplomatic, military, and intelligence expertise. Which can neither be taken for granted nor be cheap.

### **Forward partnering (Frank Hoffman)**

Frank Hoffman proposes the concept of "forward partnering" as a nuanced approach to the U.S.'s international strategy. Drawing inspiration from the focused resource allocation of selective engagement and the autonomy of offshore balancing, forward partnering is poised as an innovative solution<sup>117</sup>.

### **Goal**

At its core, forward partnering seeks to proactively work with global alliances and partners to prevent conflicts before they escalate. Through a forward deployment of naval power and Special Operations Force assets, this strategy fosters genuine collaborations rather than mere dependencies. The overarching aim is to bolster a rule-based international system that thrives

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<sup>113</sup> Hoffman, "Forward Partnership."

<sup>114</sup> "The Allies We Need - The American Interest," accessed August 9, 2023, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2011/05/01/the-allies-we-need/>.

<sup>115</sup> "Limits of Offshore Balancing – Foreign Policy," accessed August 9, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/13/limits-of-offshore-balancing/>.

<sup>116</sup> Hal Brands, "The Limits of Offshore Balancing," *Monographs, Collaborative Studies, & IRPs*, September 1, 2015, 21–27, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/444>.

<sup>117</sup> Hoffman, "Forward Partnership."

on stability. By leveraging command of the commons, it ensures that our partners and alliances maintain their freedom of action.

### **Assumptions**

One of the foundational beliefs underpinning this strategy is that maritime powers historically disrupt domestic orders less, making them more attractive allies. Such sea power-based entities usually don't face the counter-balances and backlashes characteristic of major continental powers. Given the evolving security landscape of the 21st century, there's an emphasis on collective action, problem-solving, and sustainable defense investments. This approach acknowledges that collaboration is crucial, even as some allies face challenges in adjusting due to economic strains.

### **Advantages**

A salient advantage of forward partnering lies in its adaptability to the shifting international order. Recognizing the U.S.'s broadening global interests, this strategy not only fortifies existing partnerships but also cultivates new ones in regions where U.S. influence is relatively subdued. Geographically, this approach is particularly pertinent to the Indian and Pacific theaters, given their crucial role in international trade and the hosting of several U.S. key interests. As the U.S. reorients its focus from Central Asia and the Middle East towards the Pacific, and the ever-important Persian Gulf, forward partnering provides a flexible framework that accounts for unpredictabilities, ensuring that the U.S. can swiftly reallocate resources as crises emerge<sup>118</sup>.

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<sup>118</sup> Hoffman, 36.

## Limitations

However, forward partnering isn't without its challenges. The strategy's success is contingent upon adept political, diplomatic, and military leadership. It presupposes that partners and allies will shoulder their fair share of risks and liabilities – an assumption that might not always hold true. Empowering middle powers can also shift the balance of decision-making in partnerships. Moreover, the U.S. could find itself swamped with numerous commitments, potentially garnering little more than geopolitical leverage in return.

### Comparing Strategic Options with the British experience

In the case of Britain, it chose to isolate itself from the matters of continental European powers after the Crimean War in 1856. During isolation Britain continued to grow economically and expand its colonial empire. It was able to keep its defense budgets to a low of 2-3 percent of GNP even during the 1860s when the rest of the world was in strife with conflict<sup>119</sup>. But as conflict concluded, new powers started to rise under these circumstances, Britain found itself formalizing its control over regions of its key interests and eventually Britain found itself to be in a security competition on every continent and sea.

Proponents of offshore balancing point out that Britain acted as an offshore balancer in Europe prior to the first world war. It only took continental commitments after the alliance with France in 1902 to counter Germany. Britain did not take any legal commitments to send the British forces to France, the only legal commitment it took was to the defense and independence of Belgium. Its only goal was to keep adversaries from river shell which was an invasion base for any attack on the British Isles. It maintained a reluctance to engage its forces until necessary. As the war progressed it had to continuously expand its forces and even then victory seemed far away in 1917. Only after the USA joined the war could the

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<sup>119</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 153.



Allies defeat Germany. Even though post the war Britain immediately removed its forces from Europe, as offshore balancing would suggest but it was burdened with even larger commitments in terms of expanded territories, after the world war. Further, it was the end of British predominance as it showed Britain could not have won without help from the allies. Going further back in history Britain used a similar approach in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to counter Napoleonic France's bid to control Europe. Britain joined coalitions with other European powers of the time to defeat France in 1815 as France threatened to disrupt the balance of power on the continent. Similarly, Mearsheimer points out that the USA has been an offshore balancer prior to the end of the second world war<sup>120</sup>. One may point out that the strategy of offshore balancing may have helped the powers achieve predominance in the world but may not be the best strategy to maintain. Though it is the best strategy in a multipolar world if significant advantage is maintained in terms of technology, innovation, military might, and economic potential over all other adversaries, to the point that strategic involvement turns balance heavily in the exercising states favor.

A strategic rationale reminiscent of forward partnering can be observed in Britain's choice to resolve conflicts and partner with the USA and Japan in the early 20th century. This decision was largely influenced by Britain's inability to rival these nations while simultaneously contending with Germany in Europe. The underlying aim was to retain key ports and territories in the Caribbean and the Far East, ensuring their interests in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and domestically remained uncompromised. Although this strategy was adopted after the onset of Britain's relative decline, it fortified Britain's position, enabling them to lean on these alliances during the hegemonic conflict in 1914. Drawing a parallel, the USA's endeavors to forge alliances in the Persian Gulf with countries like Saudi Arabia and

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<sup>120</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 234–64.

UAE, and in the Indo-Pacific with India, underscored by initiatives such as the QUAD<sup>121</sup> and I2U2<sup>122</sup> and augmented arms sales, appear to be driven by a forward-partnering approach aimed at countering China's growing influence in Asia<sup>123</sup>.

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<sup>121</sup> Sophie Riedel, "Debating the Quad," Text, Strategic & Defence Studies Centre (The Australian National University, March 9, 2018), <https://sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/5996/debating-quad>.

<sup>122</sup> Navdeep Suri and Kabir Taneja, "I2U2: Pathways for a New Minilateral," ORF, accessed August 13, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/i2u2-pathways-for-a-new-minilateral/>.

<sup>123</sup> Akriti Vasudeva, "US–China Strategic Competition and Washington's Conception of Quad Plus," n.d.

## Implications and Conclusion

The transformation from a unipolar to a multipolar world stage necessitates a thorough examination of historical examples, particularly for nations that have held dominant positions. The British Empire's experiences, marked by adaptive strategies, resource management, and partnerships, provide a rich context for understanding today's evolving geopolitical landscape. Here, I identify five key implications that the USA must consider as it faces challenges similar to those that Britain confronted in its prime:

1. **Adaptation to Changing Circumstances:** Britain's history demonstrates a continuous ability to adapt its strategies to meet evolving national objectives. The transition from an isolationist stance to forming major alliances within just a few decades shows a dynamic response to changing circumstances. This implies that the USA must be equally flexible, ready to adapt to new realities and tailor military strategies for different regions and adversaries.
2. **Protection of Interests and Resource Challenges:** As Britain sought to protect key interests, it often led to the acquisition of new interests, requiring even more resources. The challenge of sourcing these resources, either externally or by diverting domestic allocations, can be a complex and demanding process. The USA must be conscious of similar dynamics, where expanding global responsibilities might strain both fiscal resilience and the broader economy.
3. **Internal Tensions and Global Dominance:** The reallocation of domestic resources to support global dominance led Britain into internal tensions and debates about imperial overreach. It forced Britain to reconsider the sustainability of its global leadership role, suggesting that the USA should be cognizant of the internal implications of its

international ambitions. This also includes being cautious of relying solely on historic resilience without proactive measures to address potential relative decline.

4. **Complexity of Alliances:** Britain's alliances with regional powers were aimed at reducing security expenses but inadvertently exacerbated global tensions by feeding into the security dilemmas of adversaries. Moreover, the partnerships with the USA in the early 20th century were crucial in helping Britain maintain its global position. This highlights the importance of strategic alliances for the U.S., especially in regions with emerging threats, and the potential complexities associated with them.
5. **Conflict Prevention and Inevitable War:** Despite various strategic approaches to prevent conflict, Britain's complex alliances in the late 19th and early 20th centuries dragged it into a major war. This event signaled the end of British global dominance and demonstrated a dependency on allies for victory. The implication for the USA is a need for caution in alliance-making and a wariness of situations where its capacity to act independently might be compromised.

As emerging adversaries and rising powers reshape the global stage, the challenges for the USA and the international order are profound. The British experience offers invaluable insights, emphasizing the need for continual reassessment of policy goals and strategies.

While there isn't substantial evidence pointing to the USA's relative decline, maintaining its leading role could become increasingly complex as other major powers ascend. However, the lessons from British history illustrate that careful policy choices and adept diplomacy can mitigate these challenges, providing clarity on potential strategic pathways as the USA charts its future course.

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