WHAT IS A PEER COMPETITOR?

An initial problem in tackling the issue of a peer competitor’s emergence is the term’s murkiness. In defense circles, the term refers to challenges that go beyond conventional major theater wars (MTWs). The academic literature, however, does not use the term. Instead, it uses terms such as hegemon, great power, and major power, all of which overlap with the idea of a peer competitor. The diverse terminology and the different ways of thinking about peer competitors implicit in the different terms make it difficult to clarify the concept.

Thus, our first step is to clarify definitions. As the term suggests, a peer competitor has both capabilities (peer) and intentions (competitor). Both are necessary for a state to be a peer competitor. A state can be hostile to the United States but lack the capabilities to challenge it beyond a local crisis, or it can have the capabilities but not the intentions. The issue is examined in greater detail below, describing the nature of peer competitors and distinguishing them from other challenges.

A peer competitor, as the term is used here, is a state or collection of challengers with the power and motivation to confront the United States on a global scale in a sustained way and to a sufficient level where the ultimate outcome of a conflict is in doubt even if the United
States marshals its resources in an effective and timely manner.\(^1\) We now expand on the main components of this definition.\(^2\)

**Power**

Power is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a country to be a peer competitor. Without economic, political, military, and other types of power, a country can be a danger to the United States but is not likely to challenge the fundamentals of the U.S.-led international system.

This analysis draws on the framework of Ashley Tellis et al.\(^3\) for measuring national power. As they argue, power requires sufficient “inputs,” such as gross domestic product (GDP) and population. Inputs are well understood and measured by a wide range of government and nongovernment institutions. The Tellis et al. work, however, goes beyond conventional analyses and provides a framework for assessing nontraditional inputs that have greater importance in today’s world, such as a country’s engineering base and capacity for innovation. Selected factors identified by Tellis and his co-authors include the following:

- Technology

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\(^1\)This definition is similar to that used by the Department of Defense, with several minor modifications. The DoD currently defines a “global peer competitor” as a “nation or rival coalition with the motivation and capabilities to contest U.S. interests on a global scale.” Our definition, in contrast, uses the phrase “collection of challengers” rather than “coalition” to reflect the possibility, albeit an unlikely one, that strong challengers could include nonstate actors as well as a coalition of states. A coalition of states, however, remains the most likely type of challenge beyond the single state. Second, our definition adds the requirement that the ultimate outcome of a challenge is in doubt even if the United States marshals its resources well. This is to emphasize the level of the challenge—it is not simply a clever regional power timing its aggression to capitalize on favorable conditions, but rather a power that, in a “fair” fight, could prevail.

\(^2\)One of the objections that some have raised to the term “peer competitor” is that it implies a mirror-image of the adversary (MG Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Future Warfare*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1999, p. 139). That point is debatable. In any event, our alternative definition is at the level of national power and intent rather than military capability, and in no way does it imply a mirror-image of the adversary.

• Capacity for innovation
• Skilled workers
• Education
• Capital stock
• GDP
• Energy and nonenergy resources
• Impartial legal system
• Little corruption
• State capacity for directing society if necessary
• Size and skill of military forces

But inputs alone do not determine overall power. Tellis et al. is particularly valuable in assessing transformational capacity: a government’s ability to turn inputs into outputs (military power and overall influence). Transformational capacity includes not only efficient government but also an ability to harness new technologies and organizational innovation effectively and to capitalize on geopolitical changes. Transformational capacity varies tremendously by historical era. For example, what helps a government efficiently extract resources in an industrial economy may do little to exploit an information economy. Nevertheless, transformational capacity remains a crucial and often ignored link between potential and actual power.

Transformational capacity is an elusive variable, but it is vital for explaining why certain powers never achieved their potential. Czarist Russia for decades was feared as a potential dominant power in Europe, but it proved quite weak during the Crimean War and World War I. Other states habitually exceeded the level of power that their natural endowments might imply (e.g., Germany) through the skilled use of resources.

Motivations

What distinguishes a “peer” from a “peer competitor?” The answer lies in the peer’s foreign policy. A peer seeks only modest or no change in the international system (the relative power status of the
major states, the rules governing interaction between states, and/or the beneficiaries of those rules). A peer competitor, on the other hand, seeks to change the status quo, both to gain more power for itself and to decrease the relative power of the dominant state. To do so, the rising power must transfer relative influence in the world from the dominant power to itself. Peaceful examples include amending treaties to gain a greater voice in international decisions or modifying the trade structure to favor its citizens. More worrisome examples include attempts to conquer lost territory or to dominate neighbors. In short, a peer competitor seeks to overturn the status quo, adjusting it in its favor.

Including motives in the definition of a peer competitor raises an important question about the relation between motive and capability. Many political scientists argue that capability fosters motivation: if a power can dominate, it will. By this logic, any power that attains the GDP, population, scientific base, and other inputs along with transformational capacity will inevitably seek to rewrite the rules of the game and replace the dominant power.

But history shows tremendous variation in the behavior of rising powers. A challenge is not inevitable even when a country can afford to take on the dominant power. The United States rose in the late 19th and early 20th century without challenging directly Britain’s dominant position. In the post–Cold War era, Germany and Japan became major economic powers but worked to strengthen, rather than challenge, the U.S.-led international system.

The true question is, When do a regime’s motivations lead to conflict with the dominant power? Sources of hostile motivations might include a new, aggressive leadership, the emergence of nationalism, new military doctrines (such as preventive war), and other factors. Particularly common sources include acute dissatisfaction with the status quo; security concerns; leadership ambitions; and ideological imperatives. Causes often overlap in practice but are useful to separate for analytic purposes. Discussing intentions requires a distinction between states and the regimes that control them. Regimes drive motivations: the state’s power and position are the material from which they build.
The hegemon, of course, can affect these causes, for good or ill. If it maintains an inflexible system inimical to the interests of the rising power, naturally the rising power may try to overturn it. More directly, the hegemon can affect a rising power’s capabilities and motivations, making it less able to pose a challenge. The hegemon can threaten a potential peer, causing it to respond in self-defense.

While capabilities seldom develop quickly, motivations can change rapidly. Germany’s motivations in the 19th century changed tremendously when Kaiser Wilhelm took over; Germany went from Europe’s stabilizing force to its leading revisionist power. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the USSR became a major source of instability in areas adjoining it as well as in the entire world. This presents a dilemma: motivations must be addressed, for they are inherent to the definition of a peer competitor; yet analysts must recognize that motivations can change quickly.

A controversial point among international relations theorists is the extent to which democratic political systems act to curtail what otherwise is seen as a built-in propensity for conflict among states. Proponents of the “democratic peace” proposition argue that democracies do not fight each other. If the proposition is true, it greatly simplifies the entire problem of predicting the rise of a peer competitor, since it eliminates the need to consider democratic proto-peers and peers as potential competitors. Though the “democratic peace” literature is intriguing, at this stage it is too early to accept its conclusions for purposes of U.S. policy and U.S. intelligence estimates. The full argument for this assessment (including a review of the “democratic peace” literature) is presented in Appendix C.

Global Scale

A peer competitor must also have global capabilities to represent a threat to the United States. Capabilities need not be global in the sense that the competitor can act in every region, only in that it can act in multiple critical ones. For the purposes of this study, critical regions include industrial centers (Europe, Japan, the high-performing Asian economies), critical resource regions (the Persian Gulf), and countries/areas close to U.S. borders (Canada, Mexico, and Central America). Less important regions include the Indian
subcontinent and sub-Saharan Africa, though importance changes with development, and regions that are less important now may become important in the future. Thus, a power that could strike at U.S. commerce in Asia and threaten Persian Gulf security would be able to operate on a global scale for purposes of this study. One that could threaten commerce in Asia (one critical region) and the security of several sub-Saharan African states (where U.S. interests are minimal) would not, even though it has a multiregional capability. Indeed, even a “resurgent” China that could challenge U.S. control over the sea lanes in Asia and threaten Taiwan, Korea, and Japan would not be a true peer if it could not challenge the United States elsewhere. Because of geography, a proto-peer on the Eurasian landmass probably would be in a position to threaten U.S. interests in at least two critical areas.

In cases of an emerging peer, regional primacy is often the initial goal of such a power (this is developed further in Chapter Three in the global-regional discussion of rivalries). Should such a power succeed in attaining regional primacy despite the opposition of the hegemon, then it might be in a position to attract other allies and/or weaken the hegemon’s alliance system, allowing its rise to the position of a peer. In this sense, an alliance can help a regional power meet the global criterion. In World War II, for example, Japan was in essence a regional power, albeit a potent one. Its cooperation with Germany, however, enabled the combined powers to threaten U.S. interests across the globe. Possible peer alliances today include combinations of the European Union, Japan, Russia, and China.4

Outcome in Doubt

This final criterion emphasizes the true level of threat a peer competitor poses. Numerous analyses of Iraq and North Korea empha-

4The global criterion will be relaxed when using historical cases to illuminate our arguments. In the past, critical regions and neighboring states were almost synonyms. Even the most powerful states cared first and foremost about their neighbors (though some powers, such as the Roman Empire and Periclean Athens, depended on grain from rather distant lands, and the British Empire of course had interests throughout the globe). In most cases, however, a “peer” meant a power capable of challenging a state near its home. With the expansion of U.S. interests, however, this regional focus must expand as well.
size that surprise, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and other factors could briefly tilt the balance in favor of these regional states, enabling them to gain a short-term advantage over the United States and its allies. Yet if the United States mobilized its power, the ultimate outcome would not be in doubt. With a true peer, however, such certainty is lacking. Defeat would be possible, as would a limited victory. For a true peer competitor, a capability to deny victory would not depend on luck but rather on the power and skill of the combatants.

THE PROTO-PEER’S STRATEGIES

A proto-peer has a limited number of strategies it can conceivably pursue to increase its power. With the primary difference among the strategies being the potential pace of growth in power, a proto-peer has four main strategies realistically available. These range from internally focused changes accompanying gradual economic growth, to a less predictable but potentially faster internally focused growth due to revolutionary changes, to an externally focused strategy emphasizing alliances with other countries, to outright aggression, intimidation, and subjugation of other countries. We refer to these four strategies as reform, revolution, alliance, and conquest, respectively. The strategies are analytical constructs, identifiable outwardly by the potential pace of power growth within them, though, at a deeper level, they may arise from any number of systemic or internal factors, such as specific regime and state characteristics, the nature of the security dilemma, or the structure of existing technology.

The relationship between the proto-peer’s pace of power growth and the likelihood of a specific strategy provoking a perception of threat is largely proportional. Figure 2.1 provides a notional representation of the relationship, with the boxes representing the set of probable points of interaction between the two. The low, medium, and high marks represent the approximate range of the pace of potential growth of each strategy, with some overlap between them. The focus on power growth stems from the need for the proto-peer to catch up to the hegemon. If the proto-peer is not growing in a relative sense to the hegemon, then it is not going to become a peer. Each of the four strategies is described in detail below.
THE REFORM STRATEGY

Characteristics

The military capabilities needed for any power to compete with the United States as a global peer generally will require an economy at least close to the United States in size, productivity, and per-capita GDP. The smaller the economy, proportionately the more resources will have to be extracted from it (or in a relatively more efficient fashion) to fuel its military capabilities. The USSR during the Cold War offers a case in point of an economy much smaller than that of the United States but a relatively similar level of military effort because of the extremely high level of militarization of the economy. In any event, for most countries today, achieving that high a level of resources will require a sustained period of robust economic
growth. To understand how a country might achieve that growth, this section examines both the theoretical and empirical understandings of the causes of growth.

Policies and Institutions

The question of what causes economic growth is perhaps the most fundamental question of modern economics. Growth is the engine through which people are delivered from the misery of poverty and the motor behind epochal changes in the distribution of world power. Neoclassical theories emphasize accumulation of people (labor) and equipment (capital) as key ingredients. Yet hard experience shows this explanation to be inadequate. Endogenous growth theories add the accumulation of ideas (technological advance) and the skills to use them productively (human capital).

The problem with these theories is not so much that they are wrong, but that they are incomplete. They tend to leave out the most interesting and meaningful variable: government policy. The question of what policy is ideal remains contentious, but there is some consensus on the broad policies and institutional configurations that have fostered growth recently.

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5As a suggestive example of the time frame required, consider the following simple extrapolation of present trends. For China to reach the average per-capita GDP of the high-income countries would require 106 years of 6 percent per annum real growth (assuming the high-income countries continue growing at 2.5 percent per year, their modern historical average) and 42 years to reach $10,000 per-capita GDP in constant dollars. On a purchasing power parity basis, it would require 62 years and 22 years respectively. Calculated from 2000 World Bank Development Indicators at http://www.worldbank.org/data/databytopic/GNPPC.pdf.

6For convenience and by convention, “growth” in this section will refer to growth in per-capita GDP, unless otherwise noted.

Given that the determinants of growth vary from era to era, most experts would agree that the most important policy prescription for promoting long-term growth is flexibility. The ability to adapt to new, unforeseen challenges, rather than resting on the laurels of past success or entrenching past failures, has been and will continue to be the single most important factor in achieving sustained growth. The rare degree of flexibility in the U.S. economy would appear to be the root source of its unmatched capacity for continual renewal and probably represents its greatest relative strength.

With that caveat in mind, the following is a far from exhaustive list of the policies and institutions considered essential for growth, in roughly decreasing order of consensus:

- **Rule of law.** The greatest consensus on which policies foster growth has emerged around the need for the government to provide stable political and legal conditions.\(^8\) “Rule of law” in the modern context refers to the institutions and mechanisms that can ensure predictable and enforceable contracts and secure property rights.

- **Education and health.** Investing in education and health is necessary to create a skilled workforce. In addition to increasing worker productivity, education and health increase growth in other ways. Better education and health care for women in particular tend to improve the educational levels and health of the next generation, to reduce fertility levels, and to reduce inequality, all of which are independently associated with long-term growth.\(^9\) Educational levels and health indicators are viewed as the best predictors of countries poised for economic take-off.

- **Stable macroeconomic conditions.** Another area of agreement concerns the need for a stable macroeconomic framework, par-

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\(^8\)For a recent contribution that stresses the importance of the rule of law, see Mancur Olson, *Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships*, New York: Basic Books, 2000.

particularly low inflation and a reasonably stable currency exchange rate.

- **Trade openness.** While somewhat less consensus exists on the need for trade openness, most economists believe that openness to trade contributes to growth in important ways. Logically, international trade allows increased specialization and therefore efficiency, and it forces often complacent domestic firms to compete with foreign ones and therefore to become more productive. Perhaps more important for the developing world, openness gives domestic firms access to the technologies and ideas from abroad that endogenous growth theory emphasizes are so important for sustained growth.

- **Foreign investment.** One of the more controversial policies for promoting growth is the promotion of foreign investment by removing barriers to international capital flows. Free-flowing international capital allows savings anywhere to flow to the most productive investment opportunities. For borrowers, this means access to a larger pool of savings with which to finance and thus hasten their development. Recent financial crises, however, have caused some observers to resurrect the distrust of capital flows characteristic of the aftermath of the depression in the 1930s.

- **Limited government intervention.** The dismal growth performance of planned economies in recent decades has created a strong consensus for limiting the role of the state in allocating investment resources. The most obvious corollary of this prescription is that governments should let markets determine prices and interest rates.

- **High investments and savings rates.** One of the defining characteristics of the recent Asian growth spurt was extremely high rates of investment, backed by high rates of savings. In closed economies, saving equals investment by definition. International capital mobility breaks that identity by allowing investment to be financed with foreign savings. Nonetheless, national savings and investment rates remain highly correlated.

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11In closed economies, saving equals investment by definition. International capital mobility breaks that identity by allowing investment to be financed with foreign savings. Nonetheless, national savings and investment rates remain highly correlated.
ment spending by definition boosts growth in the short term. However, diminishing marginal returns to capital mean that simply piling up machines and adding infrastructure cannot sustain growth. Misallocation of investment resources tends to foster overcapacity, speculative bubbles, and even corruption as companies and financial institutions struggle to hide the extent of the waste.

- **Democracy and freedom.** The connection between political freedom and growth is much more tenuous. A long-standing argument holds that economic and political freedoms are mutually reinforcing.\(^\text{12}\) In this view, genuine economic freedom is impossible without the political freedom usually associated with democracy. At the same time, however, there is ample reason to expect that democracy might suppress growth by increasing the capacity of interest groups to demand inefficient government intervention in market outcomes.\(^\text{13}\) The empirical record on the relationship between democracy and growth is similarly mixed, clouded by the problems of measuring political freedom.\(^\text{14}\)

**The Nature of the Challenge**

**Type of power gained.** A strategy of “reform” aims at increasing exploitable resources available to regimes—the “inputs” that Tellis et al. identified as vital to power in today’s world. Most obviously, successful reform increases the money and industrial base that can produce military power. In addition, reform can increase the education level of military service members, the likelihood of military and technological innovation, and other factors that increase overall power. Successful reform does not necessarily change the transformational

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\(^{13}\) For an expression of the view that interest groups can slow growth, see Mancur Olson, *The Rise And Decline Of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

capacity of a government. Economies can grow for decades without the government being able to extract more usable resources from them.15

**Predictability and timeframe.** In general, a reform strategy is observable. Indicators of economic growth, while imperfect, are well known and constantly reevaluated. Both governments and the private sector widely use GDP, productivity, investment levels, corruption indices, infant mortality rates, measures of trade and capital openness, and other measurements. Indeed, the lack of such information about a country usually indicates that it is not progressing economically; good data often correlate with economic transparency and an attractive business environment.

Reform takes decades to produce power. The British industrial “revolution” took some seventy years to reach full force and another half-century for its relative decline to become noticeable. So too with the United States, Germany, and Japan. Strong economies take decades to develop. Even several years of spectacular growth often can reverse, in essence a bubble rather than a long-term trend.

**Degree of hegemon’s concern.** Because reform is both relatively predictable and takes decades, the initiation of a reform strategy may worry but seldom alarms the hegemon. The hegemon has years to probe the intentions of the rising state and to sway it in favor of the status quo. In addition, the very nature of the strategy—working with the international system in terms of trade and finance, promoting the rule of law, avoiding aggressive measures that might disrupt the growth environment, etc.—suggests that the rising power favors, rather than seeks to overturn, the status quo.

A key question when assessing reform is whether it is part of an overall strategy for power or simply desired as a good for society regardless of its international implications. This judgment is difficult, though discourse among leaders and in the public can provide some light onto the issue. In China today, reform is seen as a necessary precondition of power: until China has a strong economy and industrial base, it cannot achieve the power and influence it seeks.

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For China, reform is thus a strategy. Yet successful reform can lead even a benign power to change its strategic outlook and embrace conquest or other aggressive means of gaining influence.

THE REVOLUTION STRATEGY

Exploitation of a political or military revolution is a common but understudied source of state power. In contrast to reform, the exploitation of a revolutionary change in government or society can dramatically transform a state’s capacity to extract resources, the country’s ability to provide resources, or both. In addition, revolutions often lead to regimes with new foreign policy agendas and strong desires to overturn the status quo. Such transformations are often far more sudden—and far more difficult to anticipate—than more conventional power shifts.

Revolutions defy easy description. The term “revolution” has been used to describe political changes such as the Russian Revolution, military innovations such as the development of blitzkrieg, and social transformations such as industrialization and the spread of nationalism. For our purposes, a revolution is a change that results in a fundamental shift in government or alters the sources of national wealth and power. After a revolution, what “counts” for measuring power often changes, and a government’s transformational capacity is often completely altered.

This section focuses on two types of revolutions—political and military—in assessing how revolutionary change can affect overall power. The sources of revolution are numerous, complex, and always hotly debated. Humiliation in war, subjugation to a foreign power, financial crises, the emergence of new social elites, and a corrupt existing system all have motivated revolutionaries in the past. However, the true causes of almost every major revolution are still

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17 The line between reform and revolution often blurs. At times, social and economic developments can also be considered “revolutionary.” As these are generally slow moving, they are assessed under “reform.”
debated by historians. Almost all revolutions are highly contingent in their development and appear to follow few rules.

**Characteristics of Political Revolutions**

Political revolutions dramatically change the way a country is governed. A change from one regime to another, even of a different type, is not enough to constitute a political revolution. Rather, a political revolution produces a dramatic shift in the methods by which a country is governed and usually introduces an entire new class of governing elites and institutions. Under this definition, the French, the Russian, the Chinese nationalist and communist, the Cuban, and the Iranian revolutions are true political revolutions.

Revolutions can come from above or below. The French, the Russian, and the Iranian revolutions, among others, all involved outsiders overthrowing the entrenched order and building a new one in its place. Atatürk's Turkey and Meiji Japan, on the other hand, involved a small group of committed bureaucrats and leaders who implemented a “revolution from above.”

These revolutionaries totally restructured society and government, but they did it from within the old system. Although the motivations and means for the revolutions from above vary considerably from those from below, both radically transform the social order.

**The Nature of the Challenge**

**Revolutions and power changes.** Political revolutions change transformational capacity but have little immediate effect on raw power inputs. Political revolutions by definition bring about a new government, which generally has different institutions that affect the state’s ability to extract resources. Thus, the new regime often has an improved, or at least different, ability to extract resources. The Bolshevik regime, for example, proved itself able to force a rapid industrialization on Russia, and the French revolutionaries created a mass army: impossible changes under previous regimes. The resource

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base of these countries did not change, but the revolutionary governments were far better at exploiting resources.

State strength often grows for several reasons after a political revolution. First, weak states are more susceptible to revolutions; simply to survive and endure, a successor government must be stronger. Second, in the immediate aftermath, rivals mobilize social groups and try to exploit the power of existing resources. This revolutionary strife and competition tend to produce strong groups that are deeply rooted in society.19 Third, revolutions often destroy entrenched social classes and interests, which in the past had impeded modernization, liberalization, or other types of change.20

Strengthened by political revolutions, the state is better able to implement social and economic reforms. Stronger states can implement reforms to increase the education levels, technological development, and other vital inputs to modern power. Thus, revolutionary change is often necessary to establish a leadership that will implement the reform strategy described above.

It is worth noting that revolutions often hinder rather than help economic growth. Various communist revolutions, the Iranian revolution, and other dramatic changes often led to stagnation and economies that had little capacity to compete on the global market. Revolutions often destroy productive classes. The instability they generate undermines the rule of law and the business and investment climate. Thus, while revolutions can be a source of power, commonly they are a source of decline.

Another common and dramatic result of the revolution is an increased capacity for war. The stronger state that emerges from the revolution is, of course, more able to extract resources and sustain popular will for a conflict. But the revolution can confer other advantages for war. The types of organization that helped the revolutionary leadership triumph over the old regime often translate well into international conflict. Guerrilla armies and intelligence services, for example, produce warriors and spies that can enable states to

20Trimberger, Revolution from Above, p. 3.
wage war better. Revolutionary regimes are generally able to exploit nationalism, enabling them to bring new elites together with older ones. Revolutionary states also can wage far more costly wars, as populaces are often willing to sacrifice their lives and treasure to preserve the revolution.

Revolutionary change can lead to explosive growth and a dramatic increase in power. Every country in the world could be run more efficiently. Even countries with highly effective structures of governance have ample room for improvement that could lead to much higher economic growth. Nor are current structures, even in their most efficient forms, necessarily ideal to maximize power. Political innovation offers the potential for tremendous increases in economic growth and overall power. China has long had a strong central government, but its economy, dragged down by socialism, was too weak to provide the country with a high level of power. If China or other countries with tremendous human and natural resources could dramatically reform their economies, a tremendous growth in power might follow. Nor is economic transformation the only potential venue for revolutionary change. India, for example, has a relatively weak state due to the many fractures of Indian society. An India with a strong sense of national unity—and a far more efficient government and market—would be formidable indeed. Such changes might go beyond limited reforms and dramatically increase these countries’ power. As noted in the previous section on reform, flexibility is key to economic success: thus, revolutions today might allow countries to capitalize on future economic trends, even if the structures they establish appear ill suited for today’s economy.

**Predictability and timeframe.** Predicting a revolution is quite difficult. Scholars have suggested a range of factors that produce revolution, including class struggle, foreign domination, and regime weakness, but no consistent patterns have emerged for what are complex,
rare, and often unique events. Moreover, political revolutions can occur quickly, with no fixed path of development.

The change in state strength is another key measure of a revolution that is difficult to predict. For a state to exploit a revolution, it must have the capacity for systemic exploitation of the changes it has caused. Analysts should consider whether the new regime can harness nationalism to increase its power; whether the revolution’s ideology is compatible with the factors that contribute to growth; whether the revolutionary regime is strong at home; and whether the regime can mobilize society. While intentions can change rapidly with a revolutionary regime, power buildup often takes more time. Revolutionary change often allows a country to grow much faster, tearing down obstacles to growth that hindered development. (Though, more commonly, the chaos of the revolution and its ideology often hinder development.) The key change is transformational, allowing the regime to do more with existing resources.

Revolutions can occur quickly. Although years of insurrection preceded the successful Chinese Communist takeover of power, in Russia, Meiji Japan, Kemalist Turkey, France, and Iran, revolutionary regimes took power without a long, drawn-out battle, though in several instances extended civil wars occurred after the revolution. In these latter cases, the regime’s intentions, allies, and overall conduct changed almost overnight.

**Degree of hegemon’s concern.** Although revolutions do not necessarily increase a state’s power, the hegemon must be wary of the new regime. Particularly when powerful states undergo a revolution, the hegemon will watch carefully—previous commitments and peaceful behavior are no longer a reliable guide for future action. Revolutionary states are often highly aggressive and have an ideology that promotes conflict. In addition, revolutionary ideology often rejects the existing system, which the hegemon champions. Some regimes can also generate more power by mobilizing the society and implementing economic changes, thus unsettling regional and global power balances.

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Characteristics of Military Revolutions

Dramatic political change is not the only revolutionary strategy. Countries can dramatically increase their power by exploiting a military revolution.

A military revolution typically rests on exploiting a technological breakthrough. Accurate, light-weight artillery, breach-loading rifles, the railroad, and improved fortifications are only a few examples of how technological breakthroughs dramatically changed the nature of warfare.

At times, however, the technology that leads to a “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) is not new, or the concept exploited is organizational or social. The German blitzkrieg exploited advances in tanks, aircraft, and radio, but it depended for success on doctrinal changes that had begun in 1917. These changes included the effective use of combined arms, small unit maneuver, deep penetration, and low-level commander initiative.24

Indeed, technology alone is not sufficient: the RMA must include changes in organization, doctrine, and strategy to exploit the benefits that new technology confers.25 Andrew Krepinevich argues that technological change is only the first step. Development of military systems, innovation in military operations, and the adaptation of the organization to exploit these innovations must follow.26

Implementing an RMA often requires a more capable military and a more expensive one, but there are exceptions. New fortifications, new types of navies, air forces, and other revolutionary tools of war all required vast expenditures, many of which made it impossible for small states to survive financially in the face of military rivals. These

cost differences often led to huge differentials in military capabilities, with poorer and smaller states not only having fewer numbers of soldiers, but also less advanced militaries. Yet some RMAs, such as the musket, decreased the costs of fielding large armies. These “cheaper” RMAs allowed more powers to access the latest military advances, leveling the field.

Cost is not the only, or even the most important, factor inhibiting the development of an RMA. Some militaries resist innovation. China, for example, discovered the gun first and had a metal-barreled cannon in the mid-13th century. But it rejected ship-borne artillery and never integrated the gun into its land forces effectively, making it vulnerable to Western domination centuries later. Similarly, Turkish military forces in the late 17th century proved poor innovators, leading to steady losses to Western armies. Despite prodding from several sultans, the Turkish military remained conservative even in the face of repeated defeats. For most of the interwar period, British politicians saw the British army as a colonial police force and thus discouraged it from developing the necessary forces and tactics for a fight on the continent. All these states had the resources but neither the inclination nor the will to implement sweeping change. Table 2.2 summarizes some of the categories of military innovations.

What all of this shows is that a variety of factors, ranging from access to specific technology, willingness to pay the costs, as well as a set of historically specific circumstances all matter whether a given state can proceed with an RMA. Without any one of these, the RMA may not happen.

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28 Ibid., p. 83.
29 Ibid., pp. 126–127.
## Table 2.1

**Selected Military Innovations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical</th>
<th>Tactical, Doctrinal, and Organizational</th>
<th>Macrosocial Innovations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English longbow</td>
<td>Mongol horse-archer tactics</td>
<td>Arming and training commoners ca. 1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine guns</td>
<td>Mongol psychological warfare</td>
<td>Professionalization of armies and officer corps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>Swiss pike square</td>
<td>Standardization of weapons</td>
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<td>Railroad</td>
<td>Ship of the line tactics</td>
<td>Centralized taxation</td>
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<td>Steam ship</td>
<td>Gustavus Adolphus’ gunpowder tactics</td>
<td>Nation in arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal combustion engine</td>
<td>Napoleon's General Staff system</td>
<td>Industrialization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aircraft</td>
<td>Blitzkrieg</td>
<td>Freedom of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear weapons</td>
<td>Strategic bombing</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>


### The Nature of the Threat

**Power changes.** Harnessing a military revolution can give a state’s military a qualitative edge over its rivals, giving it an influence out of proportion to the rest of a state’s power. Thus, minor powers can quickly become major powers, while major powers can challenge the dominant power in the system despite having otherwise inferior power resources. States that were unable to adapt or exploit an RMA often were conquered or lost influence.

Successful exploitation of an RMA largely results in a transformative change in a state’s power, allowing it to gain more military power from the same core inputs or population, resources, and so on. An RMA allows the military establishment to extract more power pro-

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31For an argument that many so-called RMAs are in fact an evolution rather than a radical break, see Biddle, “The Past as Prologue.” See also A. J. Bacevich, “Just War II: Morality and High-Technology,” *The National Interest*, 45 (Fall 1996), pp. 37–47.
The Emergence of Peer Competitors: A Framework for Analysis

...jection, combat strength, or other sources of military power through its revolutionary techniques. But an RMA can also have implications at the input level. Before the mechanization of warfare, for example, access to oil reserves was not an important power resource; but after oil-burning engines were placed in ships, trucks, tanks, and airplanes, it became vital. As the “chess pieces” that matter change, so too do the power resources that create or sustain these pieces.\footnote{This concept of an RMA ushering in new units (such as the armored division or the fighter wing) is taken from Eliot Cohen, “A Revolution in Warfare,” \textit{Foreign Affairs} 75:2 (March/April 1996), pp. 37–54.}

**Predictability and timeframe.** An RMA is often difficult to anticipate or recognize. Many revolutions are only clear in retrospect: only after they proved their mettle was their importance recognized.\footnote{For a sobering, and amusing, look at mistaken expert predictions, see Christopher Cerf and Victor Navasky, \textit{The Experts Speak}, New York: Villard, 1998.} Because revolutions depend on innovation and organizational change as well as technology, no single advance signals a revolution. By its very nature, an RMA involves using technologies, operational concepts, and organizations that have never been employed before: judging their effectiveness is difficult until they are tested on the battlefield. Indeed, history is littered with innovations that failed despite their theoretical promise.\footnote{For an example, see Brian Bond and Williamson Murray, “British Armed Forces, 1918–1939,” in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (eds.), \textit{Military Effectiveness, Volume II}, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988, pp. 112–113. Another frequently cited example of a misidentified revolution is the U.S. Army’s move to a nuclear mission in the 1950s. See Andrew J. Bacevich, \textit{The Pentomic Era: The U.S. Army Between Korea and Vietnam}, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1986.}

Analysts can, however, judge whether an RMA is being sought. The decision to pursue an RMA can happen quite quickly. A new leadership, a new security threat, or other factor that changes a state’s motivations can lead it to pursue an RMA. For analysts, this can involve macro judgments about whether a state has ambitious foreign policy objectives or faces a dangerous security environment, as well as more micro-intelligence on the doctrine and strategy of a state’s security establishment. The organizational and doctrinal changes that rival militaries make are usually relatively open for intelligence analysis.
Moreover, the complexity and cost of warfare today probably make exploiting an RMA difficult for all but a few militaries. War is expensive: the Soviet Union declined in part because of its inability to sustain massive military spending. The budget for any one of the U.S. armed services exceeds that of the entire military budget for any other country. Even if a rival did develop an RMA, the United States would have the resources to emulate it, and probably surpass it, in short order. Of course, the conceptual ability to recognize an RMA and the administrative flexibility to adapt quickly to it are crucial in such a response.

The advantages to the state that first exploits an RMA often do not last long. Militaries learn, particularly defeated ones. Thus, they often incorporate the technologies and emulate the organization of their adversary. Over time, the enemy with the most resources often exploits the RMA most thoroughly simply because it has more capacity. In addition to learning, adversaries develop countermeasures.

Despite these limits, even a temporary advantage may be enough to secure victory if otherwise evenly matched. By 1941, France might have adapted its doctrine to meet the needs of blitzkrieg warfare, but it was defeated too quickly to do so. Thus, even though an RMA’s duration may be temporary, it is enough to change the military balance and affect the survival of states.

**Degree of hegemon’s concern.** The advantages conferred by an RMA can help a state challenge the hegemonic power in a number of ways. In contrast to political revolutions, RMAs do not change a regime’s motivations (in fact, new motivations may lead a regime to seek an RMA). Nevertheless, the uncertainty that surrounds the development and application of new technologies and concepts is likely to lead the hegemon to tread cautiously. Most obviously, a rising power

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that successfully harnesses an RMA can defeat the dominant power, despite the latter’s overall superiority, and thus gain an advantage that may be impossible to erase. More frequently, the rising power can defeat a host of smaller and lesser powers, enabling it to conquer territory and draw additional power accordingly—as discussed below under “conquest.”

THE ALLIANCE STRATEGY

Characteristics

One possible strategy for challenging the hegemon is for hostile powers to ally, using their combined resources to challenge the dominant power. Indeed, given the current resource disparity between the United States and possible challengers, alliance may be the only strategy available to potential competitors in the near future.

For states seeking to compete with the United States, alliances have three primary functions: aggregating power resources (the combination of power resources, primarily military, of the alliance members), enhancing power resources (use of an ally’s knowledge and resources to increase a state’s own ability to generate power), and denying the U.S. access to key strategic regions. Due to the frictions inherent in joint efforts, however, the realizable power potential of an alliance will generally be less than the sum of its parts. The effectiveness of a coalition’s power aggregation will thus be influenced by the degree of its military and political integration and coordination.

A military alliance is an agreement between two or more states as to the conditions under which they will use military force. Such agreements are usually formal, with their conditions written and officially ratified by the parties involved. However, it is possible to have informal agreements functionally equate to a written alliance. Thus a military alliance can range from a tacit understanding

between two or more states as to the conditions under which one will provide military assistance to the other(s), to a highly integrated organization such as NATO.

Although the classic alliance is defensive, the offensive alliance is the key type for the purposes of this study. Rather than provide security, the primary motivation for offensive alliances is to alter the existing international status quo. The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty is an example of an offensive alliance because both states also wanted to redraw the map of Europe.

Alliance tightness. The more cohesive the alliance, the more military power and strategic coordination it can generate. The power gains due to increasing alliance cohesion result from a reduction of the various “frictions” that reduce a coalition’s military efficiency. Such friction can arise from disagreements over the basic objectives of the war at the strategic level, or over such minute details as incompatible tactical communications equipment. These frictions mean that a military coalition cannot be as effective as a similar-sized national force directed by a single command authority. Alliance tightness, by increasing the similarity between the coalition forces and a national army, tends to reduce frictions and thus make the alliance more militarily powerful.

A coalition of U.S. rivals will probably find it difficult to use increased alliance cohesion to narrow a power gap between them and the United States. The paucity of historical examples of tight alliances, particularly offensive ones, strongly suggests that such coalitions are difficult to form.

Several factors contribute to alliance tightness:

- Fear is probably the most important factor. States that believe they cannot defend their security interests will have a strong incentive to seek allies and to maximize the power of the alliance.

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• Interest commonality is another important factor. The more that allied interests overlap, the less need there is to preserve autonomy to pursue interests outside of the alliance structure.

• The distribution of power in an alliance can also have an important effect. It will generally be easier for a tight alliance to form when it has a dominant member. The preponderant power can either impose tightness upon alliance through coercion, much as the Soviet Union did on the Warsaw Pact, or facilitate tightness by bearing a larger share of the alliance costs or offering significant side payments. In addition, smaller powers will often be willing to trade autonomy for greater security.

• The geographical or spatial distribution of the allies can also influence their ability to form cohesive alliances. The ally or allies directly adjacent or immediately vulnerable to the potential threat may have a greater interest in a tight alliance than their coalition partners who are less vulnerable. By avoiding a strong commitment, the second-line states can ensure that the frontline state bears the brunt of the peacetime alliance costs and that their own shares of the wartime costs are limited.

• A shared ideology also contributes cohesion. NATO has always had a strong ideological agenda (democratization) that is evident in its founding document (the Washington Treaty), its main “visionary” documents (such as the Harmel Report), its actions (taking in new members on the basis of political and ideological, rather than strictly military, criteria), and its entire manner of functioning.

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44NATO illustrates the daunting requirements of institutionalization needed for tight alliances. Because of the expectation—for much of NATO’s lifetime—that the Soviet military threat would persist and the calculation that militarily the alliance faced unfavorable odds, the extent of military integration in NATO proceeded far, so as to offset the numerical disadvantages through gains in efficiency. At the level of inter-
Finally, the hegemon’s response is an important counterpressure to increased alliance tightness. In a system dominated by one power, states will often be loath to risk the loss of political, economic, and security benefits that can flow from a friendly relationship with that power. In addition, hegemonic powers often have the resources available to bribe or co-opt potential balancers into remaining relatively quiescent.

The Nature of the Threat

The power advantages of alliances. The single most important advantage that an alliance can provide is an immediate increase in usable power resources. The power provided, however, relies more on the alliance’s tightness than on the simple amalgamation of its members’ forces. The power provided is largely at the “input” level—increases in manpower, greater geographic range, technology sharing, and so on.

Most obviously, an alliance can increase the size of the members’ military forces. It can also provide strategic benefits not directly related to an increase in power through aggregation. These benefits include the possibility of attaining a “virtual” global reach, reducing the number of potential opponents, and complicating a rival’s strategic calculations and plans. Having a reliable ally in a region of strategic importance, one that is willing to provide bases in the area or will use its own forces to pursue the alliance’s objectives, can provide a state with a substitute power-projection capability. States can thus use their allies to project power into regions that would otherwise be unreachable.

Alliances can also improve the basic components of national power available to a state. Through direct technology transfers from an ally, a state may be able to acquire the ability to produce and develop technologies that it would find too difficult, expensive, or time-

operability of the hardware used by the armed forces of members, there are now thousands of standardization agreements (STANAGs) that tried to make weapon systems of alliance members compatible and reduce the logistics footprint. NATO also developed extensive doctrine covering training and operations. These efforts took decades, required constant updating and evaluation, and yet still fall far short of interoperability.
consuming to develop on its own. Alliances can also help ensure the member states’ access to such vital natural resources as food, energy, critical materials, and rare metals that either cannot be produced internally or could potentially be denied to them by others. An alliance can also improve a state’s combat proficiency by exposing it to better doctrine, more experienced military personnel, and expanded training opportunities.

**The power limits of alliances.** Power accrued through alliances is not as reliable or efficient as power that is generated internally.45 This weakness is apparent at the strategic level, with the possibility that an ally not only might not honor its commitments, but also put its own interests ahead of the collective good. In addition, differences in such factors as training, equipment, doctrine, and commitments mean that the end strength of an alliance is somewhat less than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, the various “frictions” that reduce alliance strength can be difficult to calculate. This difficulty increases the possibility that a state’s foreign policy will be based upon erroneous calculations as to the relative strength of the alliance and thus result in costly mistakes.46

Because allies are not always reliable, it is necessary to discount the potential power gain achieved through alliance formation by a “loyalty coefficient.” In the absence of a binding enforcement mechanism, a state can never be sure that its partners will honor their commitments.47 Major powers generally aid their allies since they do not, as a rule, make alliance commitments lightly.48 However, the main problem is not whether states will completely fail to honor their alliance commitments, but rather how they will choose to honor them. Even when states do honor their commitments, their support

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48Michael Altfeld finds that states nearly always honor their defense pacts when an ally is attacked. Indeed, with the exception of Italy in 1914, it is difficult to find a great power that failed to honor significant alliance commitments that it had made to another great power. Michael Altfeld, “The Decision to Ally: A Theory and Test,” *The Western Political Quarterly*, 37:4 (December 1984), p. 526.
is often of dubious quality. It was cold comfort to the Poles in 1939 that France and Great Britain dutifully declared war on Germany but failed to go on the offensive because they believed that sacrificing Poland was necessary in order to win the war in the long run.

The problems of divergent interests and credibility of commitment will come into play most forcefully in alliances that are primarily offensive in nature.49 The members of such a coalition rarely share more than a common obstacle to realizing their revisionist goals. They thus have a powerful incentive to limit the military resources they must divert from the pursuit of their own goals to support their ally. The strength of such alliances is further limited by the likelihood that once an ally achieves its goals, it will end or reduce its commitment, and by the vulnerability of such alliances to an opponent’s strategy of divide and conquer.

Loss of autonomy is another cost of an alliance. States joining an alliance will have less freedom in defining and pursuing their own interests than those that do not. For instance, a state may need to tailor the structure and deployment of its military to take into account the military requirements of the alliance. Depending upon the nature of these requirements, a state could then find it difficult to use its military for non-alliance-related interests. In its most extreme manifestations, this loss of autonomy can result in a state being dragged into a war provoked by its ally.

Another power-related problem associated with alliance is that of free riding. This problem occurs when one state, having received a security guarantee from another, decides either to reduce the level of security that it provides for itself or to provide less than its “fair share.” If free riding is a problem, the alliance does not increase the overall resources significantly.

Tight alliances also are often cumbersome in making decisions. All alliance members seek input into decisionmaking, which makes the process at best cumbersome and at worst intractable. A failure to consult with alliance members, however, risks the alliance’s cohesion.

Alliances can also negatively affect a state’s external security. In essence, any state’s attempt to improve its relative power position is likely to provoke a counterresponse from other states. Because an alliance is a highly visible form of power aggregation, it will be more likely to fuel such a response—a response that will increase as the alliance grows tighter and thus potentially more dangerous. This potential security loss will be particularly great if the target of the alliance is the system’s preponderant power. A state such as the United States has the ability for great reward or punishment. As a result, few states will be willing to risk its wrath unless they perceive that an alliance will confer significant benefits.

The disadvantages that come with alienating the hegemon will be more relevant to states that are seeking security. States that are willing to take risks to make favorable adjustments in the status quo will discount many of the above disadvantages and focus primarily on an alliance’s relative ability to make these changes. The ability to form these offensive alliances thus rests upon how important the revisionist goals are to the states pursuing them and how willing the hegemon is to prevent their achievement.

**Predictability.** Determining whether an alliance will be formed, how close it will be, and the power that can be gained from it are difficult questions. Although alliances usually form in response to threat, they can also occur for a range of other reasons—particularly if the states in question are eager to change the status quo. In such cases, alliances can be forged (or, for that matter, abandoned) literally overnight. Twentieth-century examples, such as the Nazi-Soviet Pact, demonstrate why status quo regimes must worry that enemies (even ones hostile to each other) might join together to change the existing order. Once formed, it is difficult to predict how tight an alliance will be and the power it can produce. A host of conditions that produce or hinder tight alliances are discussed above, but measuring these in practice is often difficult.

**Timeframe.** Tighter alliances—ones that produce the most power—take time to build. This suggests that coordinated military operations are not likely to take place for many years, allowing the hegemon
considerable breathing space. Tighter agreements that involve the coordination of military forces or the synchronization of strategies will take longer to implement, particularly if they require the redeployment of forces or a change in military organization or size to meet the new obligations. Particularly tight alliances, such as NATO, can take decades to fully develop. Thus, the timeframe depends on the cohesion of the alliance: alliance members can coordinate their actions in the near term, but integrated operations take far longer.

**Degree of hegemon’s concern.** Even though a tight alliance may take many years to build, the hegemon is likely to respond actively to an offensive alliance designed to change the status quo, for several reasons. First, the formation of an alliance suggests an obvious intent: the alliance members have, in essence, declared themselves dedicated to changing the status quo. Second, prudent hegemons are likely to overestimate the power of a hostile alliance, focusing on its potential while discounting the many factors that hinder tightness and overall coordination.

Being the hegemon, however, confers tremendous advantages when confronting an alliance: the hegemon can bully or buy potential allies to build its own power and undercut that of its rivals. Any power considering an alliance must assess how the United States will respond (and how important regional powers will respond). They may refrain from forming an alliance, or from taking steps to make a loose alliance tighter, in response to U.S. threats and inducements. The United States could even gain in terms of relative power if the new alliance provokes a counterbalancing coalition in its favor.

**THE CONQUEST STRATEGY**

**Characteristics**

A rising power can also try to increase its strength by conquering territory. The term “conquest” is used here to describe a whole range of forceful and intimidating behaviors leading to subjugation of a target country. These behaviors range from the use of (or threat to use) force to effect annexation or establishment of a “sphere of influence” and privileged access to the given state’s resources, to an outright invasion and military occupation. Conquest has long been the most frequently traveled route to power. Persia, Rome, China, Spain, and
other empires often began with a small city or region that steadily expanded, forcing outlying areas to knuckle under and become part of the empire. As territory grew, so too did power.

The value of conquest lies in the accumulation of resources. By bringing additional land under common rule, empires increased the manpower, natural resources, geographic advantages, and other sources of power of the overall state. The link between power and territory has continued to the modern era. Indeed, the entire focus of containment during the Cold War emphasized protecting leading industrial states to avoid their being conquered and/or turned into satellites and subsequent exploitation under Soviet rule.

Conquest typically requires large and capable military forces, or at least forces that are larger and more capable than those of the target and its allies. Occupation and assimilation of the conquered territory and people often require even larger forces as well as financial resources to sustain them.

The motivations for conquest range considerably. Regimes often want more territory for settlers, redress for a historic grievance, scarce resources, to secure markets, to use nationalism to bolster their standing at home, or a combination of these factors.

The Nature of the Challenge

Power advantages. In general, conquest changes a state’s available inputs but does not strengthen its transformational capacity. The types of resources gained vary according to the nature of the conquest and actions of the conqueror. Rome gained more warriors, relying heavily on its Italian subjects to fight on behalf of the empire. Iraq’s short-lived conquest of Kuwait offered the promise of almost 10 percent of the world’s proven petroleum reserves. After World War II, the Soviets brought German scientists to the USSR, using their expertise to develop the Soviet missile and space programs. Resources can also be geostrategic. Britain’s conquest of Gibraltar from Spain enabled it to control access to the Mediterranean even

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51 The cumulativity of resources is assumed by many leading political scientists. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 172.
though Gibraltar, by itself, offered little in terms of natural or human resources.

Many of the natural resources gained from conquest may have limited value in peacetime, particularly if the world’s economic order is relatively open, but tremendous importance should war occur. For example, oil extracted from the newly conquered hinterland may be more expensive than oil received in trade. But if trade is not an option—blockade and sanctions are the rule, not the exception, in war—then the extra reserves may be invaluable.

Although natural resources can transfer almost entirely, this is not so for industrial resources. Peter Liberman estimates that Nazi Germany extracted between 19 and 44 percent of the prewar national incomes from the west European states it conquered; immediately after World War II, the Soviets transferred 23 percent of East Germany’s GNP. This suggests that power can increase considerably through conquest, but also that a high “discount level” must be applied.

Not all states can extract resources from industrial societies. A high degree of coercion is needed. Both the Nazis and the Soviets prevented wide-scale unrest in the modern industrialized states they conquered through brutality and terror. In contrast, democratic states are often poor conquerors, as they face more (though hardly overwhelming) constraints in killing, repressing, and otherwise keeping the subject population down. Thus, they typically spend more resources keeping order than they gain from the occupied state.

The more the power resources of the conquered territory lie in knowledge and human capital, the less susceptible they are to conquest. Physical resources and industrial stock can be transferred, as can a few key workers who can be bullied and bribed. Many skilled

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52 Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. This figure is all the more impressive, given that governments only extract roughly 50 percent from their own populations (the rest being necessary to feed, clothe, shelter, and otherwise care for them).

53 Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay?*
workers will emigrate—and those with the most skills are the best able to depart.54

Empire, of course, carries a price. In what Liberman has labeled the “quagmire” theory, many scholars argue that empires—particularly modern empires—require more resources to control than can be gained from them.55 Particularly in the age of modern nationalism, conquered countries often resist attempts to exploit their resources. Latter-day Alexanders thus often “overstretch” themselves and spend more resources policing their holdings than they derive from the conquest itself.56

The costs of empire are also geopolitical. Conquering powers are likely to provoke a balancing coalition against them. Both the accumulation of power by a neighbor and the obvious threat that the neighbor has demonstrated through the act of conquest leads nearby states to form coalitions against the emerging power. Thus Czarist Russia and Germany found themselves “surrounded” by hostile states concerned about their growing power.

**Predictability.** A necessary condition for successful conquest is sufficient military power. Thus, standard measures well known to military analysts on the size and quality of military forces are essential for judging whether conquest is a feasible strategy. For the purposes of anticipating a peer competitor, however, it is equally important to assess the costs and benefits of the conquest itself. Analysts must assess the likely level of resistance to the conqueror, the ability of a state to pacify conquered territory, and the costs of doing so. The type of resources gained requires particular scrutiny to judge whether they will significantly increase a conqueror’s power.


55See Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay?* p. 9, for a discussion.

**Timeframe.** Although a conquest can occur in a matter of days, in general it takes years or more to assimilate the resources—particularly when the captured territory is large and requires an elaborate coercion mechanism. Thus, while conquest demonstrates a hostile intent and states must respond to it if they fear being conquered in turn, the fact of a conquest does not necessarily tilt the balance of power in favor of the conqueror. Through successful conquest, a state can immediately gain favorable geography and access to an existing military and industrial infrastructure. Integrating this infrastructure more fully, to say nothing of making the conquered people supportive of their new master, is far harder.

**Degree of hegemon’s concern.** A conquest strategy almost always challenges the hegemon. Most obviously, it suggests hostile motivations on the part of the rising power. By using force, the rising power demonstrates its willingness to flout the rules of the game (the latest edition, at least) to achieve its ambitions. In addition, successful conquest can increase a country’s power, adding people, resources, and territory that can be exploited in a confrontation with the hegemon. Conquest also challenges the hegemon’s role as defender of the status quo, raising the question of whether the hegemon is, indeed, strong enough to defend the current system. Fortunately for the hegemon, conquests often alarm potential allies, making them more likely to work with the hegemon against the rising power.\(^5^7\)

**Does Conquest Still Pay?**

Historically, conquest may be the most important source of power, but its relevance has declined dramatically in the last fifty years. Conquest is a rocky path to power and has both political and economic costs.\(^5^8\) Several costs make it difficult to initiate and sustain a conquest:

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\(^5^7\)There are instances where the hegemon will support, or at least not oppose, a conquest. Britain, for example, supported Japan’s extension of influence in Asia before World War I, believing that this would help Britain because Great Britain and Japan were allies. But these instances are rare. Particularly in today’s world, the U.S.-supported order emphasizes the illegitimacy of conquest, making the hegemon’s support for a conquest particularly unlikely.

\(^5^8\)This summary of arguments is drawn from Brooks, “The Globalization of Production,” p. 648.
• The spread of powerful weapons, particularly nuclear weapons, that can devastate even "victorious" powers;
• Frequent strong resistance to going to war on the part of many publics, particularly democracies;
• The need to sacrifice additional lives and money to pacify the conquered territory;
• Losses of trade from interdependent economies.

Aggressive states are also likely to provoke counterbalancing coalitions. Germany's aggressive rhetoric and ambitions in the run-up to World War I gradually drove Britain to ally with France and Russia. This pattern is as close to a general rule as international relations theory offers: status quo states balance against hostile threats. If a country sought to build up its forces and otherwise increase its offensive power, its neighbors—the probable first victims of any expansion—usually would build up against it. Thus, the United States could work against an aggressive China, Russia, or other powers simply by aiding the forces of their strong and willing neighbors.59

The benefits of conquest have fallen in recent years even farther than the costs have increased. Transformative capacity has grown in importance for a state's overall power, while in the past overall resources played a greater role. The shift to knowledge-based economies has transformed the nature of wealth, and with it the benefits of conquest. The repression necessary for successful pacification is not always compatible with the free flow of information. Information-age industries may wilt in such an environment. Conquerors usually centralize decisionmaking to ensure control, further hindering innovation. The economic assets also are often mobile. In the past, land and capital stocks could be seized and wealth thus gained; information assets, however, follow skilled employees, many of whom often emigrate in response to war. Without these employees, advanced machinery will be of limited use at best. A decline in risk capital is likely to follow a war and the resultant change in regime, further decreasing innovation. Of the production

assets that remain, they are often only a small part of an overall sys-

tem rather than the entire value-added chain. Finally, an open trade

and investment system allows states to gain many of the benefits of

war without paying the political and economic costs.60

This combination of higher costs of going to war and fewer benefits

has made war and conquest less practicable and therefore less desir-

able. As such, we contend that conquest is a far less useful path to

becoming a peer competitor today than in the past, and that it car-

ries more risks. But the argument that conquest is now a less valu-

able strategy does not mean that war with conquest aims will not

occur in the future or that it has ceased to be an option for certain

types of proto-peers. Depending on the specific opportunity struc-

ture, a strategy of conquest may not have ceased to be an option for

some states as a path to power aggregation. Nevertheless, wars over

secession, irredentism, and other internally motivated strife are still

more likely than wars of conquest, and such wars affect the overall

power balance relatively little.61


61For a persuasive argument along these lines, see Michael Mandelbaum, “Is Major


work arguing the obsolescence of major war, see John Mueller, Retreat from