

A World Without Power

By Niall Ferguson

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Critics of U.S. global dominance should pause and consider the alternative. If the United States retreats from its hegemonic role, who would supplant it? Not Europe, not China, not the Muslim world—and certainly not the United Nations. Unfortunately, the alternative to a single superpower is not a multilateral utopia, but the anarchic nightmare of a new Dark Age.

We tend to assume that power, like nature, abhors a vacuum. In the history of world politics, it seems, someone is always the hegemon, or bidding to become it. Today, it is the United States; a century ago, it was the United Kingdom. Before that, it was France, Spain, and so on. The famed 19th-century German historian Leopold von Ranke, doyen of the study of statecraft, portrayed modern European history as an incessant struggle for mastery, in which a balance of power was possible only through recurrent conflict.

The influence of economics on the study of diplomacy only seems to confirm the notion that history is a competition between rival powers. In his bestselling 1987 work, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Yale University historian Paul Kennedy concluded that, like all past empires, the U.S. and Russian superpowers would inevitably succumb to overstretch. But their place would soon be usurped, Kennedy argued, by the rising powers of China and Japan, both still unencumbered by the dead weight of imperial military commitments.

In his 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, University of Chicago political scientist John J. Mearsheimer updates Kennedy's account. Having failed to succumb to overstretch, and after surviving the German and Japanese challenges, he argues, the United States must now brace for the ascent of new rivals. "[A] rising China is the most dangerous potential threat to the United States in the early twenty-first century," contends Mearsheimer. "[T]he United States has a profound interest in seeing Chinese economic growth slow considerably in the years ahead." China is not the only threat Mearsheimer foresees. The European Union (EU) too has the potential to become "a formidable rival."

Power, in other words, is not a natural monopoly; the struggle for mastery is both perennial and universal. The "unipolarity" identified by some commentators following the Soviet collapse cannot last much longer, for the simple reason that history hates a hyperpower. Sooner or later, challengers will emerge, and back we must go to a multipolar, multipower world.

But what if these esteemed theorists are all wrong? What if the world is actually heading for a period when there is no hegemon? What if, instead of a balance of power, there is an absence of power?

Such a situation is not unknown in history. Although the chroniclers of the past have long been preoccupied with the achievements of great powers—whether civilizations, empires, or nation-states—they have not wholly overlooked eras when power receded.

Unfortunately, the world's experience with power vacuums (eras of “apolarity,” if you will) is hardly encouraging. Anyone who dislikes U.S. hegemony should bear in mind that, rather than a multipolar world of competing great powers, a world with no hegemon at all may be the real alternative to U.S. primacy. Apolarity could turn out to mean an anarchic new Dark Age: an era of waning empires and religious fanaticism; of endemic plunder and pillage in the world's forgotten regions; of economic stagnation and civilization's retreat into a few fortified enclaves.

Pretenders to the Throne

Why might a power vacuum arise early in the 21st century? The reasons are not especially hard to imagine.

The clay feet of the U.S. colossus | Powerful though it may seem—in terms of economic output, military might, and “soft” cultural power—the United States suffers from at least three structural deficits that will limit the effectiveness and duration of its quasi-imperial role in the world. The first factor is the nation's growing dependence on foreign capital to finance excessive private and public consumption. It is difficult to recall any past empire that long endured after becoming so dependent on lending from abroad. The second deficit relates to troop levels: The United States is a net importer of people and cannot, therefore, underpin its hegemonic aspirations with true colonization. At the same time, its relatively small volunteer army is already spread very thin as a result of major and ongoing military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Finally, and most critically, the United States suffers from what is best called an attention deficit. Its republican institutions and political traditions make it difficult to establish a consensus for long-term nation-building projects. With a few exceptions, most U.S. interventions in the past century have been relatively short lived. U.S. troops have stayed in West Germany, Japan, and South Korea for more than 50 years; they did not linger so long in the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, or Vietnam, to say nothing of Lebanon and Somalia. Recent trends in public opinion suggest that the U.S. electorate is even less ready to sacrifice blood and treasure in foreign fields than it was during the Vietnam War.

“Old Europe” grows older | Those who dream the EU might become a counterweight to the U.S. hyperpower should continue slumbering. Impressive though the EU's enlargement this year has been—not to mention the achievement of 12-country monetary union—the reality is that demography likely condemns the EU to decline in international influence and importance. With fertility rates dropping and life expectancies rising, West European societies may, within fewer than 50 years, display median ages in the upper 40s. Europe's “dependency ratio” (the number of non-working-age citizens for every working-age citizen) is set to become crippling high. Indeed, Old Europe will soon be truly old. By 2050, one in every three Italians, Spaniards, and Greeks is expected to be 65 or older, even allowing for ongoing immigration. Europeans therefore face an agonizing choice between Americanizing their economies, i.e., opening their borders to much more immigration, with the cultural changes that would entail, or transforming their union into a fortified retirement community. Meanwhile, the EU's stalled institutional reforms mean that individual European nation-states will continue exercising considerable autonomy outside the economic sphere, particularly in foreign and security policy.

China's coming economic crisis | Optimistic observers of China insist the economic miracle of the past decade will endure, with growth continuing at such a sizzling pace that within 30 or 40 years China's gross domestic product will surpass that of the United States. Yet it is far from clear that the normal rules for emerging markets are suspended for Beijing's benefit. First, a fundamental incompatibility exists between the free-market economy, based inevitably on private property and the rule of law, and the Communist monopoly on power, which breeds corruption and impedes the creation of transparent fiscal, monetary, and regulatory institutions. As is common in “Asian tiger” economies, production is running far ahead of domestic consumption—thus making the economy heavily dependent on exports—and far ahead of domestic financial development. Indeed, no one knows the full extent of the problems in the Chinese domestic banking sector. Those Western banks that are buying up bad debts to establish themselves in China must remember that this strategy was tried once before: a century ago, in the era of the Open Door policy, when U.S. and European firms rushed into China only to see their investments vanish amid the turmoil of war and revolution.

Then, as now, hopes for China's development ran euphorically high, especially in the United States. But those hopes were dashed, and could be disappointed again. A Chinese currency or banking crisis could have earth-shaking ramifications, especially when foreign investors realize the difficulty of repatriating assets held in China. Remember, when foreigners invest directly in factories rather than through intermediaries such as bond markets, there is no need for domestic capital controls. After all, how does one repatriate a steel mill?

The fragmentation of Islamic civilization | With birthrates in Muslim societies more than double the European average, the Islamic countries of Northern Africa and the Middle East are bound to put pressure on Europe and the United States in the years ahead. If, for example, the population of Yemen will exceed that of Russia by 2050 (as the United Nations forecasts, assuming constant fertility), there must either be dramatic improvements in the Middle East's economic performance or substantial emigration from the Arab world to aging Europe. Yet the subtle Muslim colonization of Europe's cities—most striking in places like Marseille, France, where North Africans populate whole suburbs—may not necessarily portend the advent of a new and menacing “Eurabia.” In fact, the Muslim world is as divided as ever, and not merely along the traditional fissure between Sunnis and Shiites. It is also split between those Muslims seeking a peaceful *modus vivendi* with the West (an impulse embodied in the Turkish government's desire to join the EU) and those drawn to the revolutionary Islamic Bolshevism of renegades like al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Opinion polls from Morocco to Pakistan suggest high levels of anti-American sentiment, but not unanimity. In Europe, only a minority expresses overt sympathy for terrorist organizations; most young Muslims in England clearly prefer assimilation to jihad. We are a long way from a bipolar clash of civilizations, much less the rise of a new caliphate that might pose a geopolitical threat to the United States and its allies.

In short, each of the potential hegemonies of the 21st century—the United States, Europe, and China—seems to contain within it the seeds of decline; and Islam remains a diffuse force in world politics, lacking the resources of a superpower.

Dark and Disconnected

Suppose, in a worst-case scenario, that U.S. neoconservative hubris is humbled in Iraq and that the Bush administration's project to democratize the Middle East at gunpoint ends in ignominious withdrawal, going from empire to decolonization in less than two years. Suppose also that no aspiring rival power shows interest in filling the resulting vacuums—not only in coping with Iraq but conceivably also Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Haiti. What would an apolar future look like?

The answer is not easy, as there have been very few periods in world history with no contenders for the role of global, or at least regional, hegemon. The nearest approximation in modern times could be the 1920s, when the United States walked away from President Woodrow Wilson's project of global democracy and collective security centered on the League of Nations. There was certainly a power vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Romanov, Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Ottoman empires, but it did not last long. The old West European empires were quick to snap up the choice leftovers of Ottoman rule in the Middle East. The Bolsheviks had reassembled the czarist empire by 1922. And by 1936, German *revanche* was already far advanced.

One must go back much further in history to find a period of true and enduring apolarity; as far back, in fact, as the ninth and 10th centuries.

In this era, the remains of the Roman Empire—Rome and Byzantium—receded from the height of their power. The leadership of the West was divided between the pope, who led Christendom, and the heirs of Charlemagne, who divided up his short-lived empire under the Treaty of Verdun in 843. No credible claimant to the title of emperor emerged until Otto was crowned in 962, and even he was merely a German prince with pretensions (never realized) to rule Italy. Byzantium, meanwhile, was dealing with the Bulgar rebellion to the north.

By 900, the Abbasid caliphate initially established by Abu al-Abbas in 750 had passed its peak; it was in steep decline by the middle of the 10th century. In China, too, imperial power was in a dip between the T'ang and Sung dynasties. Both these empires had splendid capitals—Baghdad and Ch'ang-an—but neither had serious aspirations of territorial expansion.

The weakness of the old empires allowed new and smaller entities to flourish. When the Khazar tribe converted to Judaism in 740, their khanate occupied a Eurasian power vacuum between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. In Kiev, far from the reach of Byzantium, the regent Olga laid the foundation for the future Russian Empire in 957 when she converted to the Orthodox Church. The Seljuks—forebears of the Ottoman Turks—carved the Sultanate of Rum as the Abbasid caliphate lost its grip over Asia Minor. Africa had its mini-empire in Ghana; Central America had its Mayan civilization. Connections between these entities were minimal or nonexistent. This condition was the antithesis of globalization. It was a world broken up into disconnected, introverted civilizations.

One feature of the age was that, in the absence of strong secular polities, religious questions often produced serious convulsions. Indeed, religious institutions often set the political agenda. In the eighth and ninth centuries, Byzantium was racked by controversy over the proper role of icons in worship. By the 11th century, the pope felt confident enough to humble Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV during the battle over which of them should have the right to appoint bishops. The new monastic orders amassed considerable power in Christendom, particularly the Cluniacs, the first order to centralize monastic authority. In the Muslim world, it was the ulema (clerics) who truly ruled. This atmosphere helps explain why the period ended with the extraordinary holy wars known as the Crusades, the first of which was launched by European Christians in 1095.

Yet, this apparent clash of civilizations was in many ways just another example of the apolar world's susceptibility to long-distance military raids directed at urban centers by more backward peoples. The Vikings repeatedly attacked West European towns in the ninth century—Nantes in 842, Seville in 844, to name just two. One Frankish chronicler lamented “the endless flood of Vikings” sweeping southward. Byzantium, too, was sacked in 860 by raiders from Rus, the kernel of the future Russia. This “fierce and savage tribe” showed “no mercy,” lamented the Byzantine patriarch. It was like “the roaring sea ... destroying everything, sparing nothing.” Such were the conditions of an anarchic age.

Small wonder that the future seemed to lie in creating small, defensible, political units: the Venetian republic—the quintessential city-state, which was conducting its own foreign policy by 840—or Alfred the Great's England, arguably the first thing resembling a nation-state in European history, created in 886.

Superpower Failure

Could an apolar world today produce an era reminiscent of the age of Alfred? It could, though with some important and troubling differences.

Certainly, one can imagine the world's established powers—the United States, Europe, and China—retreating into their own regional spheres of influence. But what of the growing pretensions to autonomy of the supranational bodies created under U.S. leadership after the Second World War? The United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (formerly the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) each considers itself in some way representative of the “international community.” Surely their aspirations to global governance are fundamentally different from the spirit of the Dark Ages?

Yet universal claims were also an integral part of the rhetoric of that era. All the empires claimed to rule the world; some, unaware of the existence of other civilizations, maybe even believed that they did. The reality, however, was not a global Christendom, nor an all-embracing Empire of Heaven. The reality was political fragmentation. And that is also true today. The defining characteristic of our age is not a shift of power upward to supranational institutions, but downward. With the end of states' monopoly on the means of violence and the collapse of their control over channels of communication, humanity has entered an era characterized as much by disintegration as integration.

If free flows of information and of means of production empower multinational corporations and nongovernmental organizations (as well as evangelistic religious cults of all denominations), the free flow of destructive technology empowers both criminal organizations and terrorist cells. These groups can operate, it seems, wherever they choose, from Hamburg to Gaza. By contrast, the writ of the international community is not global at all. It is, in fact, increasingly confined to a few

strategic cities such as Kabul and Pristina. In short, it is the nonstate actors who truly wield global power—including both the monks and the Vikings of our time.

So what is left? Waning empires. Religious revivals. Incipient anarchy. A coming retreat into fortified cities. These are the Dark Age experiences that a world without a hyperpower might quickly find itself reliving. The trouble is, of course, that this Dark Age would be an altogether more dangerous one than the Dark Age of the ninth century. For the world is much more populous—roughly 20 times more—so friction between the world's disparate “tribes” is bound to be more frequent. Technology has transformed production; now human societies depend not merely on freshwater and the harvest but also on supplies of fossil fuels that are known to be finite. Technology has upgraded destruction, too, so it is now possible not just to sack a city but to obliterate it.

For more than two decades, globalization—the integration of world markets for commodities, labor, and capital—has raised living standards throughout the world, except where countries have shut themselves off from the process through tyranny or civil war. The reversal of globalization—which a new Dark Age would produce—would certainly lead to economic stagnation and even depression. As the United States sought to protect itself after a second September 11 devastates, say, Houston or Chicago, it would inevitably become a less open society, less hospitable for foreigners seeking to work, visit, or do business. Meanwhile, as Europe's Muslim enclaves grew, Islamist extremists' infiltration of the EU would become irreversible, increasing trans-Atlantic tensions over the Middle East to the breaking point. An economic meltdown in China would plunge the Communist system into crisis, unleashing the centrifugal forces that undermined previous Chinese empires. Western investors would lose out and conclude that lower returns at home are preferable to the risks of default abroad.

The worst effects of the new Dark Age would be felt on the edges of the waning great powers. The wealthiest ports of the global economy—from New York to Rotterdam to Shanghai—would become the targets of plunderers and pirates. With ease, terrorists could disrupt the freedom of the seas, targeting oil tankers, aircraft carriers, and cruise liners, while Western nations frantically concentrated on making their airports secure. Meanwhile, limited nuclear wars could devastate numerous regions, beginning in the Korean peninsula and Kashmir, perhaps ending catastrophically in the Middle East. In Latin America, wretchedly poor citizens would seek solace in Evangelical Christianity imported by U.S. religious orders. In Africa, the great plagues of AIDS and malaria would continue their deadly work. The few remaining solvent airlines would simply suspend services to many cities in these continents; who would wish to leave their privately guarded safe havens to go there?

For all these reasons, the prospect of an apolar world should frighten us today a great deal more than it frightened the heirs of Charlemagne. If the United States retreats from global hegemony—its fragile self-image dented by minor setbacks on the imperial frontier—its critics at home and abroad must not pretend that they are ushering in a new era of multipolar harmony, or even a return to the good old balance of power.

Be careful what you wish for. The alternative to unipolarity would not be multipolarity at all. It would be apolarity—a global vacuum of power. And far more dangerous forces than rival great powers would benefit from such a not-so-new world disorder.

*Niall Ferguson is Herzog professor of history at New York University's Stern School of Business and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. His latest book is *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004)*

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