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Power Politics and Scarcity in the Modern Age: A Zero Sum Game

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Human society has demonstrated the utilization of an advantage in order to gain power and authority through war and conquest. In the age of industrialization, the Modern State has provided the weak with strategies of resistance and engagement in order to influence the dominant state. But it is resource scarcity and positional conflict that will drive the strong to act, indifferent to the strategies available to the weak. This essay will argue that the dominant will ultimately capitalize on advantages to maximize their interests, through war and conditions of scarcity, and disregard the limited counter-strategies available to the weak.

History shows that empires with steel weapons were able to conquer those with inferior weapons of stones and wood. In the context of war, Sun Tzu writes on how an army, formed by a state, should strategize relative to the strength of the enemy. Sun Tzu writes extensively on perceived power, deception, military strength and the economic tolls of war. [1] Military power has facilitated survival and territorial expansion, and Jared Diamond posits that empires are able to exploit an advantage and conquer the weak. [2] However, even though the similarities of empires and states are not clear, social organization can help to identify the basic structural elements.

It is important to firstly define what is meant by the state. Referencing social organization, Elman Service classifies human societies as bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states.[3] But the problem of defining “the state” is not so easy; some, like Koppers, speak of “the state” as if it refers to any human group that controls a territory. But to establish conformity, the state is an entity that can expand without splitting, incorporate other polities and ethnic groups and become more populous, more heterogeneous and more powerful without limitations to size and strength.[4] Accordingly, an empire is a distinct type of political entity, that may or may not be a state, and that possesses both a home territory and foreign territories.[5]

The Mongol Empire developed and built a formidable military that maximized its technological advantages as it expanded, subjugating foreign territories at their will. Their success relied on siege warfare, cutting off resources for cities and towns, diverting rivers into cities in order to flood them, using enemy prisoners as shields when besieging towns and cities, assimilating the ideas, tools and techniques from the engineers and specialists within the towns and cities they conquered, and using them to aid the cavalry in capturing cities.[6] One tactic the Mongols executed well was the feigned retreat strategy, where the Mongols would retreat, sometimes for weeks, and lead the advancing army into a trap and then annihilate the enemy.[7] But what basic elements gave the Mongols the ability to impose their will upon others?

From an anthropological perspective, there are advantages the dominant have capitalized on. According to the “automatic theory”, the invention of agriculture allowed for a surplus of food, enabling some individuals to divorce themselves from food production and specialize in various occupations, thus creating an extensive division of labor.[8] This allowed for political integration and united a number of independent communities into a state. But how did farming become synonymous with the strong? As Jared Diamond states, through growing the select calorie rich edible species of plants and animals, the farmer could grow and feed up to 100 times more farmers and herders than hunter-gatherers.[9] This gave food-producing societies an immense military advantage of brute numbers over hunter-gatherer tribes.

Referring to the question concerning the dominance of the Mongols, the key advantage that allowed the nomadic military machine to subjugate food-producing, agricultural societies came from the mastery of the horse in battle. Though not exclusive, a number of elements gave the Mongol empire advantages such as communications, military tactics and political innovations.[10] The capture of the heavily fortified Tangut kingdom, known for its large town-dweller population, is an illustration of the unique advantages deployed during the Mongol Empire's reign. The Tangut's would eventually provide additional resources necessary to continue the expansion of the empire.[11] The Spanish conquest of the Incas would have been much more arduous without the Horse and Gun.[12] These key, tactical resources gave the Spanish a massive advantage in conquering the Incan Empire.

In short, the ability to domesticate the plant and animal, led to denser human populations which were a pre-requisite that allowed for the development of newer technologies and gave rise to the development of settled, politically centralized, socially stratified and economically complex societies.[13] These societies would eventually impose their will on the weak in order to expand their territory through conquest with the use of these new weapons of war such as Horses and Guns.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, and the state continues to capitalize on advantages to accomplish their interests. An article presented by Milosz Kucharski, *China in the age of American Primacy*, discusses these advantages. Kucharski's article argues that the U.S., without the backing of the United Nations Security Council, used its military power in order to attack the sovereign state of Iraq.[14] This act of unilateralism exemplifies how, under the auspices of democratic state building and preemptive war policy, a stronger state was able to impose its will on another without the consensus of European and Asian countries. The weaker states of China, Germany, France and Russia, had no choice but to accept their status. Whereas China 'adopted a traditional strategy of using barbarians, in this case Europeans, to fight the barbarians, in this case Americans'.[15] The Chinese strategy references the Balance of Power theory, where states will respond against any nation that threatens to become strong enough and impose its will on others.[16] Kucharski argues further by discussing how the weak must endure and could effect change relative to US hegemony.

Earlier the discussion focused on the how the Mongols were able to conquer as they did. Based on those points, each tribe, chiefdom or state must endure what is imposed upon them unless they had the capability to check their adversary. As Ikenberry writes, "Balance of power is the most enduring mechanism to restrain power because it is the most reliable; power checks power."[17] In the case of China, Milos argues that even though China disagreed with US actions in Iraq, it was pure ideology that compelled China to disagree with the US intervention. China had to weigh and analyze the benefits of economic development against antagonizing the US and decided that its own development trumped the perceived threat to its sovereignty.[18] Under these circumstances, China chose to tolerate American unilateralism, while economic development took precedence. Economic power does not translate into military power, but economic capacity has been viewed as a basis from which to project and inflict significant harm since the industrial age started.[19] Taking the realist concept of the Balance of Power, China must build its economy in order to develop the military capability to check the hegemon.

Though the world is now under a unipolar age led by the United States of America, this does not necessarily mean the dominant hegemon has the ability to exercise absolute authority. In the framework of a unipolar world led by the strongest, most dynamic military the world has ever seen, many states do not see themselves as willing or capable of competing with the United States militarily. This presents a differing viewpoint, and John Ikenberry discusses why territorial sovereignty is no longer threatened amongst states with a nuclear military deterrent.[20] With conventional nuclear warfare neutralized, states must utilize different tools to further their interests. This confers a new realm of augmenting national interests in the era of American hegemony, where weaker states are pursuing various strategies of resistance and engagement.

In our current age of Unipolarity with the United States acting as captain of the free, liberal world, her weaker allies have the means to influence and impose constraints. One example is bandwagoning, a strategy that entails policies that support and accommodate the dominant power.[21] Here we find various examples of weaker states attempting to work with the hegemon as they seek to share in the spoils of war or influence policy within the dominant state. In this case, Britain's decision to bandwagon with the U.S. during the invasion of Iraq can be seen as gaining some

political leverage or advantage with the hegemon. In a world of unipolarity, the threat to territorial sovereignty is constrained through a more dynamic and durable America, where the open and decentralized political process in the US gives others an opportunity to voice their opinions through representatives. This gives weaker states a viable possibility to manipulate US policy.[22]

Recent Chinese actions are an ideal case that exemplifies the traits of a weaker state bandwagoning to advance their own interests. The war on terror and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, though in China's backyard, was greeted with open arms of support. Rather than antagonize the US and succumb to fears of US encirclement, the Chinese instead voted with the US in many UN resolutions that supported the invasion of Afghanistan, gave monetary assistance to Kabul's reconstruction, cancelled Afghanistan's debt and contributed to Afghanistan's educational system.[23] This strategy of appeasement, as supported by classical European diplomacy, is indicated by the removal of the principal causes of conflict and disagreements between states.[24]

Bargaining is another alternative, assertive strategy used by the weaker states to influence the policy of the hegemon. Ikenberry further describes this term as old-fashioned pulling and hauling, where the weaker state works with similar minded domestic groups and politicians within the dominant state.[25] The idea here is that with increased interdependency, weaker states can have a voice in the political process of the dominant state. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye describe this form of bargaining with a term called "complex interdependence", where they posit that increased cooperation among states comes with the decline in use of military force and the increase in economic and other forms of interdependency.[26]

In the context of the Democratic Peace theory, where Democratic states do not go to war with each other, the argument that the dominant exercise their authority is further diminished with these strategies of resistance and engagement. Since many weaker states are democratic, they employ strategies designed to withhold cooperation or apply economic penalties to the US whilst bargaining. The use of tariffs, embargo's or the threat to deny the use of a strategic assets that the US needs are by far the strongest measures that a weaker state can utilize to sway policy making in the US. One member of the British parliament challenged the Bush administration, arguing that there is a price to pay in acting alone and that is to withhold cooperation on intelligence sharing in the war on terrorism. "I would switch off U.S. – U.K. intelligence cooperation for three days to make the point of how important cooperation is," remarked Lord William Wallace.[27] In this context, the U.S. cannot force its hand and must work with the lesser state in order to seek common ground within the realm of international affairs.

Given that many of the weaker states are allies of the U.S. and hence have similar political governments that bring a balance to restraining US power, has civilization reached a pinnacle where the strong must continue to work with the weak as a comprise? What will be discussed in the following section is based on positional conflict within the context of scarcity and how the dominant power will react when faced with scarcity of resources.

Considering the three tenets of realism, as E.H. Carr explains, the course of history can be understood as a cause and effect sequence, theory does not create practice, but practice theory and politics are not a function of ethics; morality is the product of power.[28] In addition, Schweller adds two new principles: "humankind's "tribal nature" ineluctably leads to group conflict and competition where humankind cannot transcend conflict through the progressive power of reason to discover a science of peace."[29] Leading from these points, the realist argument confers that even though we are in a period where weaker states seek to cozy up to the dominant state, there will always be a battle between the "haves" and "have nots." Let us acknowledge that security, in theory, is a positive sum value and can be shared without diminishing its enjoyment for the individual actor.[30] However, given the scarcity of resources, the same cannot be said of glory, status, political influence, leadership, and leverage and market shares.[31] Taking this one step further, scarce natural resources such as water, oil and minerals will invoke further conflicts in the future as supplies dwindle and sharing becomes less likely. The protection and access to vital resources have profoundly influenced American military policy since the 1800's and have taken a renewed precedence with the end of the Cold War. [32] This policy is a clear indication that America will not tolerate the disruption of vital resources by a lesser state.

In considering the scarcity of resources argument, these limitations in supply motivate the dominant state to act.

During the first Iraq war, Saddam Hussein believed that his army was so well equipped that no outside power would contest Iraq's annexation of Kuwait.[33] However, the US, acting on the belief that the stable flow of energy was essential to national security, intervened to halt the perceived threat to regional production and supply in energy within the Persian Gulf.[34] The more recent invasion and regime change in Iraq by the US and her Coalition of the Willing confirms positional conflict flexing its muscle in the battlefield to secure the free flow of natural resources, among other political initiatives. As Richard Betts underlines, who rules when the fighting stops is the essence of positional conflict. In the case of Iraq, the victor (U.S.) is now in a position to dictate policy.[35]

Realists argue that the international system exists in a state of antagonism or anarchy, where the goal of each state is to maximize its military and economic power in order to pursue their national interests.[36] In this context, if the dominant state and weaker states have similar political systems, the scarcity effect will still have an effect on the competing state economies and the world political system. Exploitable, finite resources will begin to decline in abundance and opportunities for economic growth will subsequently decline. It is here that interstate relations will transpire into a zero-sum game in which one state's gain is another's loss.[37] Based on these points, the dominant state will exercise its power to ensure its survival and economic security. Schweller argues that all states cannot enjoy a positive trade balance and where everyone has status, then no one does. Simply put, scarcity implies status.[38]

During the 1990's China demonstrated their resentment of the United States and the special privileges they enjoy as the hegemon. The Chinese appetite for status was put on display when China decided to heighten tensions to curb the independence policies promoted by President Lee Teng-Hui during the 1995 elections in Taiwan.[39] Taking these actions into account, the Chinese showed that they prefer a multipolar world where no one state has primacy or special claim to leadership.[40] America, realizing the stakes, responded by sending two aircraft carrier groups to the area and dramatically upgraded the US-Japan security relationship. This response demonstrated America's status in the world via military deployment and political maneuvers with allies. This confirms the argument that status is a scarce resource in the political landscape and that everyone cannot share it, but rather there will only be one leader in positional conflict.

The anthropological answer to the question highlighted the argument where history has shown that societies capitalize on advantages at the expense of the weak. This approach, though outside of traditional International Relations theory, gave the argument a sound basis from which to derive a consensus to the brutal truth of power in raw numbers, stemming from farming power, and the advantageous capabilities of Horses and Guns. The development of the Modern state brought in the counter argument concerning strategies that weaker states leaned on when interacting with a dominant state. However, considering the realist view and human tribal nature, resources that are subject to conditions of scarcity are finite and cannot be shared by everyone. States will act accordingly to ensure their security and survival under scarcity and positional conflict, irrespective of the strategies the weak will attempt.

[1] Sun Tzu, *The art of War*, translated by Dr. Lionel Guiles, (London, 1910)

[2] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (London: Jonathan Cape, Random House, 1997)

[3] Elman Service, *Primitive Social Organization* (New York: Random House, 1962), 59, 110, 143.

[4] Robert Cohen & Elman Service, *Origins of the State* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Inc., 1978), 2,4.

[5] David Armstrong, "The evolution of international society," in *The Globalization of World*

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[6] Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, Crown Publisher and Three Rivers Press, 2004)

[7]Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan, his life and legacy, trans. and ed. Thomas N. Haining (Malden, MA, USA, Blackwell Publishing, 1992*), 104.

[8] Robert Caneiro, "A theory of the origin of the State*," Science* 169 (1970): 733-38.

[9] Diamond, 88.

[10] Weatherford, 44.

[11] Ratchnevsky, 104-105.

[12] Philip Means, *Pedro Pizarro's account: Relation of the Discovery and Conquest of the Kingdoms of Peru* (New York: Cortés Society, 1921)

[13] Diamond, 85-92.

[14] Milosz Kucharski, "*China in the age of American Primacy,"* International Relations 26(1) (2011): 60-77.

[15] John Pomfret, "China Backs Europeans on Iraqi Inspections", *Washington Post*, 7 March 2003, sec. A, p. 24.

[16] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 183.

[17] G. John Ikenberry, "*Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence: Great Power Politics in the Age of Unipolarity",* paper presented as a draft after the discussions in National Intelligence Council 2020, USA, July 28th, 2003

[18] Kucharski, *60-77.*

[19] Emily O. Goldman and Leo J. Blanken, "*The Economic Foundations of Military Power"* in Guns and Butter: The Political Economy of International Security, edited by Peter Dombrowski, (Boulder, CO USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2005), 37.

[20] G. John Ikenberry, "*Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence: Great Power Politics in the Age of Unipolarity",* paper presented as a draft after the discussions in National Intelligence Council 2020, USA, July 28th, 2003

[21] Randall Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19 (1) (Summer 1994): 72- 107.

[22] G. John Ikenberry, "*Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence: Great Power Politics in the Age of Unipolarity",* paper presented as a draft after the discussions in National Intelligence Council 2020, USA, July 28th, 2003.

[23] David M. Lampton, "The U.S.-China Relationship Facing International Security Crises: Three Case Studies in Post-9/11 Bilateral Relations," paper presented as a monograph from the Nixon Center, USA, January 29th, 2004.

[24] Gordon Craig and Alexander George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

[25] G. John Ikenberry, "*Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence: Great Power Politics in the Age of Unipolarity",* paper presented as a draft after the discussions in National Intelligence Council 2020, USA, July 28th, 2003.

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[29] Schweller, Randall, "Realism and the Present Great Power System" in Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War, edited by Ethan Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 28 – 57.

[30] Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation As Self-Help," *International Security* 19 (3) (Winter 1994-95): 50-90.

[31] Robert Jervis, "International Primacy: Is the Game worth the Candle?" *International Security* 17(4) (Spring 1993): 58-59

[32] Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars: the new landscape of Global Conflict,* (New York: Metropolitan books, 2001), 4-5

[33] William W. Keller, *Arm in Arm: the Political Economy of the Global Arms Trade* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 1-19.

[34] Klare, 53.

[35] Richard K. Betts, "The Delusion of Impartial Intervention," Foreign Affairs 73(6) (November – December 1994): 21.

[36] Michael Mastanduno and Ethan B. Kapstein, "Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War" in Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War, edited by Ethan Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 2 – 3.

[37] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 200-201

[38] Randall L. Schweller, *New Realist research on Alliances: Refining, not Refuting, Walt's balancing proposition*, American Political Science Review, Vol. 91, No. 4 (New York, 1997), 928.

[39] William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status competition and Great Power War" in *World Politics,* (Princeton: 2009), 54-55.

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