

"This book ranks with, and in many respects surpasses, the works of Morgenthau and Waltz. . . . All serious students of international affairs will have to come to grips with its argument."

—Samuel H. Huntington, *Harvard University*

# THE TRAGEDY OF GREAT POWER POLITICS

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utility of war for acquiring power. I also focus on balancing and buck-passing, which are the main strategies that states employ when faced with a rival that threatens to upset the balance of power.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I examine the historical record to see whether there is evidence to support the theory. Specifically, I compare the conduct of the great powers from 1792 to 1990 to see whether their behavior fits the predictions of offensive realism.

In Chapter 8, I lay out a simple theory that explains when great powers balance and when they choose to buck-pass, and then I examine that theory against the historical record. Chapter 9 focuses on the causes of war. Here, too, I lay out a simple theory and then test it against the empirical record.

Chapter 10 challenges the oft-made claim that international politics has been fundamentally transformed with the end of the Cold War, and that great powers no longer compete with each other for power. I briefly assess the theories underpinning that optimistic perspective, and then I look at how the great powers have behaved in Europe and Northeast Asia between 1991 and 2000. Finally, I make predictions about the likelihood of great-power conflict in these two important regions in the early twenty-first century.

## TWO

# Anarchy and the Struggle for Power

**G**reat powers, I argue, are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal.

This perspective does not allow for status quo powers, except for the unusual state that achieves preponderance. Instead, the system is populated with great powers that have revisionist intentions at their core.<sup>1</sup> This chapter presents a theory that explains this competition for power. Specifically, I attempt to show that there is a compelling logic behind my claim that great powers seek to maximize their share of world power. I do not, however, test offensive realism against the historical record in this chapter. That important task is reserved for later chapters.

## WHY STATES PURSUE POWER

**M**Y explanation for why great powers vie with each other for power and strive for hegemony is derived from five assumptions about the international system. None of these assumptions alone mandates that states behave competitively. Taken together, however, they depict a world in which states have considerable reason to think and sometimes behave aggressively. In particular, the system encourages states to look for opportunities to maximize their power vis-à-vis other states.

How important is it that these assumptions be realistic? Some social scientists argue that the assumptions that underpin a theory need not conform to reality. Indeed, the economist Milton Friedman maintains that the best theories "will be found to have assumptions that are wildly inaccurate descriptive representations of reality, and, in general, the more significant the theory, the more unrealistic the assumptions."<sup>2</sup> According to this view, the explanatory power of a theory is all that matters. If unrealistic assumptions lead to a theory that tells us a lot about how the world works, it is of no importance whether the underlying assumptions are realistic or not.

I reject this view. Although I agree that explanatory power is the ultimate criterion for assessing theories, I also believe that a theory based on unrealistic or false assumptions will not explain much about how the world works.<sup>3</sup> Sound theories are based on sound assumptions. Accordingly, each of these five assumptions is a reasonably accurate representation of an important aspect of life in the international system.

### Bedrock Assumptions

The first assumption is that the international system is anarchic, which does not mean that it is chaotic or riven by disorder. It is easy to draw that conclusion, since realism depicts a world characterized by security competition and war. By itself, however, the realist notion of anarchy has nothing to do with conflict; it is an ordering principle, which says that the system comprises independent states that have no central authority above them.<sup>4</sup> Sovereignty, in other words, inheres in states because there is no higher ruling body in the international system.<sup>5</sup> There is no "government over governments."<sup>6</sup>

The second assumption is that great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other. States are potentially dangerous to each other, although some states have more military might than others and are therefore more dangerous. A state's military power is usually identified with the particular weaponry at its disposal, although even if there were

no weapons, the individuals in those states could still use their feet and hands to attack the population of another state. After all, for every neck, there are two hands to choke it.

The third assumption is that states can never be certain about other states' intentions. Specifically, no state can be sure that another "we will not use its offensive military capability to attack the first state. This is not to say that states necessarily have hostile intentions. Indeed, all of the states in the system may be reliably benign, but it is impossible to be sure of that judgment because intentions are impossible to divine with 100 percent certainty."<sup>7</sup> There are many possible causes of aggression, and no state can be sure that another state is not motivated by one of them.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, intentions can change quickly, so a state's intentions can be benign one day and hostile the next. Uncertainty about intentions is unavoidable, which means that states can never be sure that other states do not have offensive intentions to go along with their offensive capabilities.

The fourth assumption is that survival is the primary goal of great powers. Specifically, states seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order. Survival dominates other motives because, once a state is conquered, it is unlikely to be in a position to pursue other aims. Soviet leader Josef Stalin put the point well during a war scare in 1927: "We can and must build socialism in the [Soviet Union]. But in order to do so we first of all have to exist." States can and do pursue other goals, of course, but security is their most important objective.

The fifth assumption is that great powers are rational actors. They are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it. In particular, they consider the preferences of other states and how their own behavior is likely to affect the behavior of those other states, and how the behavior of those other states is likely to affect their own strategy for survival. Moreover, states pay attention to the long term as well as the immediate consequences of their actions.

As emphasized, none of these assumptions alone dictates that great powers as a general rule should behave aggressively toward each other. There is surely the possibility that some state might have hostile intentions,

but the only assumption dealing with a specific motive that is common to all states says that their principal objective is to survive, which by itself is a rather harmless goal. Nevertheless, when the five assumptions are married together, they create powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively with regard to each other. In particular, three general patterns of behavior result: fear, self-help, and power maximization.

### State Behavior

Great powers fear each other. They regard each other with suspicion, and they worry that war might be in the offing. They anticipate danger. There is little room for trust among states. For sure, the level of fear varies across time and space, but it cannot be reduced to a trivial level. From the perspective of any one great power, all other great powers are potential enemies. This point is illustrated by the reaction of the United Kingdom and France to German reunification at the end of the Cold War. Despite the fact that these three states had been close allies for almost forty-five years, both the United Kingdom and France immediately began worrying about the potential dangers of a united Germany.<sup>10</sup>

The basis of this fear is that in a world where great powers have the capability to attack each other and might have the motive to do so, any state bent on survival must be at least suspicious of other states and reluctant to trust them. Add to this the "911" problem—the absence of a central authority to which a threatened state can turn for help—and states have even greater incentive to fear each other. Moreover, there is no mechanism, other than the possible self-interest of third parties, for punishing an aggressor. Because it is sometimes difficult to deter potential aggressors, states have ample reason not to trust other states and to be prepared for war with them.

The possible consequences of falling victim to aggression further amplify the importance of fear as a motivating force in world politics. Great powers do not compete with each other as if international politics were merely an economic marketplace. Political competition among states is a much more dangerous business than mere economic intercourse: the former can

lead to war, and war often means mass killing on the battlefield as well as mass murder of civilians. In extreme cases, war can even lead to the destruction of states. The horrible consequences of war sometimes cause states to view each other not just as competitors, but as potentially deadly enemies. Political antagonism, in short, tends to be intense, because the stakes are great.

States in the international system also aim to guarantee their own survival. Because other states are potential threats, and because there is no higher authority to come to their rescue when they dial 911, states cannot depend on others for their own security. Each state tends to see itself as vulnerable and alone, and therefore it aims to provide for its own survival. In international politics, God helps those who help themselves. This emphasis on self-help does not preclude states from forming alliances.<sup>11</sup> But alliances are only temporary marriages of convenience: today's alliance partner might be tomorrow's enemy, and today's enemy might be tomorrow's alliance partner. For example, the United States fought with China and the Soviet Union against Germany and Japan in World War II, but soon thereafter flip-flopped enemies and partners and allied with West Germany and Japan against China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

States operating in a self-help world almost always act according to their own self-interest and do not subordinate their interests to the interests of other states, or to the interests of the so-called international community. The reason is simple: it pays to be selfish in a self-help world. This is true in the short term as well as in the long term, because if a state loses in the short run, it might not be around for the long haul.

Apprehensive about the ultimate intentions of other states, and aware that they operate in a self-help system, states quickly understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system. The stronger a state is relative to its potential rivals, the less likely it is that any of those rivals will attack it and threaten its survival. Weaker states will be reluctant to pick fights with more powerful states because the weaker states are likely to suffer military defeat. Indeed, the bigger the gap in power between any two states, the less likely it is that the weaker

will attack the stronger. Neither Canada nor Mexico, for example, would countenance attacking the United States, which is far more powerful than its neighbors. The ideal situation is to be the hegemon in the system. As Immanuel Kant said, "It is the desire of every state, or of its ruler, to arrive at a condition of perpetual peace by conquering the whole world, if that were possible."<sup>12</sup> Survival would then be almost guaranteed.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, states pay close attention to how power is distributed among them, and they make a special effort to maximize their share of world power. Specifically, they look for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals. States employ a variety of means—economic, diplomatic, and military—to shift the balance of power in their favor, even if doing so makes other states suspicious or even hostile. Because one state's gain in power is another state's loss, great powers tend to have a zero-sum mentality when dealing with each other. The trick, of course, is to be the winner in this competition and to dominate the other states in the system. Thus, the claim that states maximize relative power is tantamount to arguing that states are disposed to think offensively toward other states, even though their ultimate motive is simply to survive. In short, great powers have aggressive intentions.<sup>14</sup>

Even when a great power achieves a distinct military advantage over its rivals, it continues looking for chances to gain more power. The pursuit of power stops only when hegemony is achieved. The idea that a great power might feel secure without dominating the system, provided it has an "appropriate amount" of power, is not persuasive, for two reasons.<sup>15</sup> First, it is difficult to assess how much relative power one state must have over its rivals before it is secure. Is twice as much power an appropriate threshold? Or is three times as much power the magic number? The root of the problem is that power calculations alone do not determine which side wins a war. Clever strategies, for example, sometimes allow less powerful states to defeat more powerful foes.

Second, determining how much power is enough becomes even more complicated when great powers contemplate how power will be distributed among them ten or twenty years down the road. The capabilities of

individual states vary over time, sometimes markedly, and it is often difficult to predict the direction and scope of change in the balance of power. Remember, few in the West anticipated the collapse of the Soviet Union before it happened. In fact, during the first half of the Cold War, many in the West feared that the Soviet economy would eventually generate greater wealth than the American economy, which would cause a marked power shift against the United States and its allies. What the future holds for China and Russia and what the balance of power will look like in 2020 is difficult to foresee.

Given the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and tomorrow, great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power. Only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to be the hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive.<sup>16</sup> But even if a great power does not have the wherewithal to achieve hegemony (and that is usually the case), it will still act offensively to amass as much power as it can, because states are almost always better off with more rather than less power. In short, states do not become status quo powers until they completely dominate the system.

All states are influenced by this logic, which means that not only do ~~they~~ they look for opportunities to take advantage of one another, they also work to ensure that other states do not take advantage of them. After all, rival states are driven by the same logic, and most states are likely to recognize their own motives at play in the actions of other states. In short, states ultimately pay attention to defense as well as offense. They think about conquest themselves, and they work to check aggressor states from gaining power at their expense. This inexorably leads to a world of constant security competition, where states are willing to lie, cheat, and use brute force if it helps them gain advantage over their rivals. Peace, if one defines that concept as a state of tranquility or mutual concord, is not likely to break out in this world.

The "security dilemma," which is one of the most well-known concepts in the international relations literature, reflects the basic logic of offensive

realism. The essence of the dilemma is that the measures a state takes to increase its own security usually decrease the security of other states. Thus, it is difficult for a state to increase its own chances of survival without threatening the survival of other states. John Herz first introduced the security dilemma in a 1950 article in the journal *World Politics*.<sup>17</sup> After discussing the anarchic nature of international politics, he writes, "Striving to attain security from . . . attack, [states] are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on."<sup>18</sup> The implication of Herz's analysis is clear: the best way for a state to survive in anarchy is to take advantage of other states and gain power at their expense. The best defense is a good offense. Since this message is widely understood, ceaseless security competition ensues. Unfortunately, little can be done to ameliorate the security dilemma as long as states operate in anarchy.

It should be apparent from this discussion that saying that states are power maximizers is tantamount to saying that they care about relative power, not absolute power. There is an important distinction here, because states concerned about relative power behave differently than states interested in absolute power.<sup>19</sup> States that maximize relative power are concerned primarily with the distribution of material capabilities. In particular, they try to gain as large a power advantage as possible over potential rivals, because power is the best means to survival in a dangerous world. Thus, states motivated by relative power concerns are likely to forgo large gains in their own power, if such gains give rival states even greater power, for smaller national gains that nevertheless provide them with a power advantage over their rivals.<sup>20</sup> States that maximize absolute power, on the other hand, care only about the size of their own gains, not those of other states. They are not motivated by balance-of-power logic but instead are concerned with amassing power without regard to how much power other states control. They would jump at the opportunity for large gains, even if a rival gained more in the deal. Power, according to this logic, is not a zero-sum game (survival is a zero-sum game).<sup>21</sup>

### Calculated Aggression

There is obviously little room for status quo powers in a world where states are inclined to look for opportunities to gain more power. Nevertheless, great powers cannot always act on their offensive intentions, because behavior is influenced not only by what states want, but also by their capacity to realize these desires. Every state might want to be king of the hill, but not every state has the wherewithal to compete for that lofty position, much less achieve it. Much depends on how military might is distributed among the great powers. A great power that has a marked power advantage over its rivals is likely to behave more aggressively, because it has the capability as well as the incentive to do so.

By contrast, great powers facing powerful opponents will be less inclined to consider offensive action and more concerned with defending the existing balance of power from threats by their more powerful opponents. Let there be an opportunity for those weaker states to revise the balance in their own favor, however, and they will take advantage of it. Stalin put the point well at the end of World War II: "Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise."<sup>22</sup> States might also have the capability to gain advantage over a rival power but nevertheless decide that the perceived costs of offense are too high and do not justify the expected benefits.

In short, great powers are not mindless aggressors so bent on gaining power that they charge headlong into losing wars or pursue Pyrrhic victories. On the contrary, before great powers take offensive actions, they think carefully about the balance of power and about how other states will react to their moves. They weigh the costs and risks of offense against the likely benefits. If the benefits do not outweigh the risks, they sit tight and wait for a more propitious moment. Nor do states start arms races that are unlikely to improve their overall position. As discussed at greater length in Chapter 3, states sometimes limit defense spending either because spending more would bring no strategic advantage or because spending more would weaken the economy and undermine the state's power in the long run.<sup>23</sup> To paraphrase Clint Eastwood, a state has to know its limitations to survive in the international system.

Nevertheless, great powers miscalculate from time to time because they invariably make important decisions on the basis of imperfect information. States hardly ever have complete information about any situation they confront. There are two dimensions to this problem. Potential adversaries have incentives to misrepresent their own strength or weakness, and to conceal their true aims.<sup>24</sup> For example, a weaker state trying to deter a stronger state is likely to exaggerate its own power to discourage the potential aggressor from attacking. On the other hand, a state bent on aggression is likely to emphasize its peaceful goals while exaggerating its military weakness, so that the potential victim does not build up its own arms and thus leaves itself vulnerable to attack. Probably no national leader was better at practicing this kind of deception than Adolf Hitler.

But even if disinformation was not a problem, great powers are often unsure about how their own military forces, as well as the adversary's, will perform on the battlefield. For example, it is sometimes difficult to determine in advance how new weapons and untested combat units will perform in the face of enemy fire. Peacetime maneuvers and war games are helpful but imperfect indicators of what is likely to happen in actual combat. Fighting wars is a complicated business in which it is often difficult to predict outcomes. Remember that although the United States and its allies scored a stunning and remarkably easy victory against Iraq in early 1991, most experts at the time believed that Iraq's military would be a formidable foe and put up stubborn resistance before finally succumbing to American military might.<sup>25</sup>

Great powers are also sometimes unsure about the resolve of opposing states as well as allies. For example, Germany believed that if it went to war against France and Russia in the summer of 1914, the United Kingdom would probably stay out of the fight. Saddam Hussein expected the United States to stand aside when he invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Both aggressors guessed wrong, but each had good reason to think that its initial judgment was correct. In the 1930s, Adolf Hitler believed that his great-power rivals would be easy to exploit and isolate because each had little interest in fighting Germany and instead was determined to get someone else to assume that burden. He guessed right. In short, great powers constantly

find themselves confronting situations in which they have to make important decisions with incomplete information. Not surprisingly, they sometimes make faulty judgments and end up doing themselves serious harm.

Some defensive realists go so far as to suggest that the constraints of the international system are so powerful that offense rarely succeeds, and that aggressive great powers invariably end up being punished.<sup>26</sup> As noted, they emphasize that 1) threatened states balance against aggressors and ultimately crush them, and 2) there is an offense-defense balance that is usually heavily tilted toward the defense, thus making conquest especially difficult. Great powers, therefore, should be content with the existing balance of power and not try to change it by force. After all, it makes little sense for a state to initiate a war that it is likely to lose; that would be self-defeating behavior. It is better to concentrate instead on preserving the balance of power.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, because aggressors seldom succeed, states should understand that security is abundant, and thus there is no good strategic reason for wanting more power in the first place. In a world where conquest seldom pays, states should have relatively benign intentions toward each other. If they do not, these defensive realists argue, the reason is probably poisonous domestic politics, not smart calculations about how to guarantee one's security in an anarchic world.

There is no question that systemic factors constrain aggression, especially balancing by threatened states. But defensive realists exaggerate those restraining forces.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the historical record provides little support for their claim that offense rarely succeeds. One study estimates that there were 63 wars between 1815 and 1980, and the initiator won 39 times, which translates into about a 60 percent success rate.<sup>29</sup> Turning to specific cases, Otto von Bismarck unified Germany by winning military victories against Denmark in 1864, Austria in 1866, and France in 1870, and the United States as we know it today was created in good part by conquest in the nineteenth century. Conquest certainly paid big dividends in these cases. Nazi Germany won wars against Poland in 1939 and France in 1940, but lost to the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1945. Conquest ultimately did not pay for the Third Reich, but if Hitler had restrained himself after the fall of France and had not invaded the Soviet Union,

conquest probably would have paid handsomely for the Nazis. In short, the historical record shows that offense sometimes succeeds and sometimes does not. The trick for a sophisticated power maximizer is to figure out when to raise and when to fold.<sup>29</sup>

### HEGEMONY'S LIMITS

**G**reat powers, as I have emphasized, strive to gain power over their rivals and hopefully become hegemons. Once a state achieves that exalted position, it becomes a status quo power. More needs to be said, however, about the meaning of hegemony.

A hegemon is a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system.<sup>31</sup> No other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it. In essence, a hegemon is the only great power in the system. A state that is substantially more powerful than the other great powers in the system is not a hegemon, because it faces, by definition, other great powers. The United Kingdom in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, is sometimes called a hegemon. But it was not a hegemon, because there were four other great powers in Europe at the time—Austria, France, Prussia, and Russia—and the United Kingdom did not dominate them in any meaningful way. In fact, during that period, the United Kingdom considered France to be a serious threat to the balance of power. Europe in the nineteenth century was multipolar, not unipolar.

Hegemony means domination of the system, which is usually interpreted to mean the entire world. It is possible, however, to apply the concept of a system more narrowly and use it to describe particular regions, such as Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Western Hemisphere. Thus, one can distinguish between *global hegemons*, which dominate the world, and *regional hegemons*, which dominate distinct geographical areas. The United States has been a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere for at least the past one hundred years. No other state in the Americas has sufficient military might to challenge it, which is why the United States is widely recognized as the only great power in its region.

My argument, which I develop at length in subsequent chapters, is that except for the unlikely event wherein one state achieves clear-cut nuclear superiority, it is virtually impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony. The principal impediment to world domination is the difficulty of projecting power across the world's oceans onto the territory of a rival great power. The United States, for example, is the most powerful state on the planet today. But it does not dominate Europe and Northeast Asia the way it does the Western Hemisphere, and it has no intention of trying to conquer and control those distant regions, mainly because of the stopping power of water. Indeed, there is reason to think that the American military commitment to Europe and Northeast Asia might wither away over the next decade. In short, there has never been a global hegemon, and there is not likely to be one anytime soon.

The best outcome a great power can hope for is to be a regional hegemon and possibly control another region that is nearby and accessible over land. The United States is the only regional hegemon in modern history, although other states have fought major wars in pursuit of regional hegemony: imperial Japan in Northeast Asia, and Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, and Nazi Germany in Europe. But none succeeded. The Soviet Union, which is located in Europe and Northeast Asia, threatened to dominate both of those regions during the Cold War. The Soviet Union might also have attempted to conquer the oil-rich Persian Gulf region, with which it shared a border. But even if Moscow had been able to dominate Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf, which it never came close to doing, it still would have been unable to conquer the Western Hemisphere and become a true global hegemon.

States that achieve regional hegemony seek to prevent great powers in other regions from duplicating their feat. Regional hegemons, in other words, do not want peers. Thus the United States, for example, played a key role in preventing imperial Japan. Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union from gaining regional supremacy. Regional hegemons attempt to check aspiring hegemons in other regions because they fear that a rival great power that dominates its own region will be an especially powerful foe that is essentially free to cause trouble



in the fearful great power's backyard. Regional hegemons prefer that there be at least two great powers located together in other regions, because their proximity will force them to concentrate their attention on each other rather than on the distant hegemon.

Furthermore, if a potential hegemon emerges among them, the other great powers in that region might be able to contain it by themselves, allowing the distant hegemon to remain safely on the sidelines. Of course, if the local great powers were unable to do the job, the distant hegemon would take the appropriate measures to deal with the threatening state. The United States, as noted, has assumed that burden on four separate occasions in the twentieth century, which is why it is commonly referred to as an "offshore balancer."

In sum, the ideal situation for any great power is to be the only regional hegemon in the world. That state would be a status quo power, and it would go to considerable lengths to preserve the existing distribution of power. The United States is in that enviable position today; it dominates the Western Hemisphere and there is no hegemon in any other area of the world. But if a regional hegemon is confronted with a peer competitor, it would no longer be a status quo power. Indeed, it would go to considerable lengths to weaken and maybe even destroy its distant rival. Of course, both regional hegemons would be motivated by that logic, which would make for a fierce security competition between them.

## POWER AND FEAR

That great powers fear each other is a central aspect of life in the international system. But as noted, the level of fear varies from case to case. For example, the Soviet Union worried much less about Germany in 1930 than it did in 1939. How much states fear each other matters greatly, because the amount of fear between them largely determines the severity of their security competition, as well as the probability that they will fight a war. The more profound the fear is, the more intense is the security competition, and the more likely is war. The logic is straightforward: a scared

state will look especially hard for ways to enhance its security, and it will be disposed to pursue risky policies to achieve that end. Therefore, it is important to understand what causes states to fear each other more or less intensely.

Fear among great powers derives from the fact that they invariably have some offensive military capability that they can use against each other, and the fact that one can never be certain that other states do not intend to use that power against oneself. Moreover, because states operate in an anarchic system, there is no night watchman to whom they can turn for help if another great power attacks them. Although anarchy and uncertainty about other states' intentions create an irreducible level of fear among states that leads to power-maximizing behavior, they cannot account for why sometimes that level of fear is greater than at other times. The reason is that anarchy and the difficulty of discerning state intentions are constant facts of life, and constants cannot explain variation. The capability that states have to threaten each other, however, varies from case to case, and it is the key factor that drives fear levels up and down. Specifically, the more power a state possesses, the more fear it generates among its rivals. Germany, for example, was much more powerful at the end of the 1930s than it was at the decade's beginning, which is why the Soviets became increasingly fearful of Germany over the course of that decade.

This discussion of how power affects fear prompts the question, What is power? It is important to distinguish between potential and actual power. A state's potential power is based on the size of its population and the level of its wealth. These two assets are the main building blocks of military power. Wealthy rivals with large populations can usually build formidable military forces. A state's actual power is embedded mainly in its army and the air and naval forces that directly support it. Armies are the central ingredient of military power, because they are the principal instrument for conquering and controlling territory—the paramount political objective in a world of territorial states. In short, the key component of military might, even in the nuclear age, is land power.

Power considerations affect the intensity of fear among states in three main ways. First, rival states that possess nuclear forces that can survive a

nuclear attack and retaliate against it are likely to fear each other less than if these same states had no nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, for example, the level of fear between the superpowers probably would have been substantially greater if nuclear weapons had not been invented. The logic here is simple: because nuclear weapons can inflict devastating destruction on a rival state in a short period of time, nuclear-armed rivals are going to be reluctant to fight with each other, which means that each side will have less reason to fear the other than would otherwise be the case. But as the Cold War demonstrates, this does not mean that war between nuclear powers is no longer thinkable; they still have reason to fear each other.

Second, when great powers are separated by large bodies of water, they usually do not have much offensive capability against each other, regardless of the relative size of their armies. Large bodies of water are formidable obstacles that cause significant power-projection problems for attacking armies. For example, the stopping power of water explains in good part why the United Kingdom and the United States (since becoming a great power in 1898) have never been invaded by another great power. It also explains why the United States has never tried to conquer territory in Europe or Northeast Asia, and why the United Kingdom has never attempted to dominate the European continent. Great powers located on the same landmass are in a much better position to attack and conquer each other. That is especially true of states that share a common border. Therefore, great powers separated by water are likely to fear each other less than great powers that can get at each other over land.

Third, the distribution of power among the states in the system also markedly affects the levels of fear.<sup>32</sup> The key issue is whether power is distributed more or less evenly among the great powers or whether there are sharp power asymmetries. The configuration of power that generates the most fear is a multipolar system that contains a potential hegemon—what I call “unbalanced multipolarity.”

A potential hegemon is more than just the most powerful state in the system. It is a great power with so much actual military capability and so much potential power that it stands a good chance of dominating and

controlling all of the other great powers in its region of the world. A potential hegemon need not have the wherewithal to fight all of its rivals at once, but it must have excellent prospects of defeating each opponent alone, and good prospects of defeating some of them in tandem. The key relationship, however, is the power gap between the potential hegemon and the second most powerful state in the system: there must be a marked gap between them. To qualify as a potential hegemon, a state must have—by some reasonably large margin—the most formidable army as well as the most latent power among all the states located in its region.

Bipolarity is the power configuration that produces the least amount of fear among the great powers, although not a negligible amount by any means. Fear tends to be less acute in bipolarity, because there is usually a rough balance of power between the two major states in the system. Multipolar systems without a potential hegemon, what I call “balanced multipolarity,” are still likely to have power asymmetries among their members, although these asymmetries will not be as pronounced as the gaps created by the presence of an aspiring hegemon. Therefore, balanced multipolarity is likely to generate less fear than unbalanced multipolarity, but more fear than bipolarity.

This discussion of how the level of fear between great powers varies with changes in the distribution of power, not with assessments about each other's intentions, raises a related point. When a state surveys its environment to determine which states pose a threat to its survival, it focuses mainly on the offensive *capabilities* of potential rivals, not their intentions. As emphasized earlier, intentions are ultimately unknowable, so states worried about their survival must make worst-case assumptions about their rivals' intentions. Capabilities, however, not only can be measured but also determine whether or not a rival state is a serious threat. In short, great powers balance against capabilities, not intentions.<sup>33</sup>

Great powers obviously balance against states with formidable military forces, because that offensive military capability is the tangible threat to their survival. But great powers also pay careful attention to how much latent power rival states control, because rich and populous states usually can and do build powerful armies. Thus, great powers tend to fear states

with large populations and rapidly expanding economies, even if these states have not yet translated their wealth into military might.

### THE HIERARCHY OF STATE GOALS

**S**urvival is the number one goal of great powers, according to my theory. In practice, however, states pursue non-security goals as well. For example, great powers invariably seek greater economic prosperity to enhance the welfare of their citizenry. They sometimes seek to promote a particular ideology abroad, as happened during the Cold War when the United States tried to spread democracy around the world and the Soviet Union tried to sell communism. National unification is another goal that sometimes motivates states, as it did with Prussia and Italy in the nineteenth century and Germany after the Cold War. Great powers also occasionally try to foster human rights around the globe. States might pursue any of these, as well as a number of other non-security goals.

Offensive realism certainly recognizes that great powers might pursue these non-security goals, but it has little to say about them, save for one important point: states can pursue them as long as the requisite behavior does not conflict with balance-of-power logic, which is often the case.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the pursuit of these non-security goals sometimes complements the hunt for relative power. For example, Nazi Germany expanded into eastern Europe for both ideological and realist reasons, and the superpowers competed with each other during the Cold War for similar reasons. Furthermore, greater economic prosperity invariably means greater wealth, which has significant implications for security, because wealth is the foundation of military power. Wealthy states can afford powerful military forces, which enhance a state's prospects for survival. As the political economist Jacob Viner noted more than fifty years ago, "there is a long-run harmony" between wealth and power.<sup>35</sup> National unification is another goal that usually complements the pursuit of power. For example, the unified German state that emerged in 1871 was more powerful than the Prussian state it replaced.

Sometimes the pursuit of non-security goals has hardly any effect on the balance of power, one way or the other. Human rights interventions usually fit this description, because they tend to be small-scale operations that cost little and do not detract from a great power's prospects for survival. For better or for worse, states are rarely willing to expend blood and treasure to protect foreign populations from gross abuses, including genocide. For instance, despite claims that American foreign policy is infused with moralism, Somalia (1992–93) is the only instance during the past one hundred years in which U.S. soldiers were killed in action on a humanitarian mission. And in that case, the loss of a mere eighteen soldiers in an infamous firefight in October 1993 so traumatized American policymakers that they immediately pulled all U.S. troops out of Somalia and then refused to intervene in Rwanda in the spring of 1994, when ethnic Hutu went on a genocidal rampage against their Tutsi neighbors.<sup>36</sup> Stopping that genocide would have been relatively easy and it would have had virtually no effect on the position of the United States in the balance of power.<sup>37</sup> Yet nothing was done. In short, although realism does not prescribe human rights interventions, it does not necessarily proscribe them.

But sometimes the pursuit of non-security goals conflicts with balance-of-power logic, in which case states usually act according to the dictates of realism. For example, despite the U.S. commitment to spreading democracy across the globe, it helped overthrow democratically elected governments and embraced a number of authoritarian regimes during the Cold War, when American policymakers felt that these actions would help contain the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup> In World War II, the liberal democracies put aside their antipathy for communism and formed an alliance with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany. "I can't take communism," Franklin Roosevelt emphasized, but to defeat Hitler "I would hold hands with the Devil."<sup>39</sup> In the same way, Stalin repeatedly demonstrated that when his ideological preferences clashed with power considerations, the latter won out. To take the most blatant example of his realism, the Soviet Union formed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939—the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact—in hopes that the agreement would at least temporarily satisfy Hitler's territorial ambitions in eastern Europe

and turn the *Wehrmacht* toward France and the United Kingdom.<sup>40</sup> When great powers confront a serious threat, in short, they pay little attention to ideology as they search for alliance partners.<sup>41</sup>

Security also trumps wealth when those two goals conflict, because "defence," as Adam Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*, "is of much more importance than opulence."<sup>42</sup> Smith provides a good illustration of how states behave when forced to choose between wealth and relative power. In 1651, England put into effect the famous Navigation Act, protectionist legislation designed to damage Holland's commerce and ultimately cripple the Dutch economy. The legislation mandated that all goods imported into England be carried either in English ships or ships owned by the country that originally produced the goods. Since the Dutch produced few goods themselves, this measure would badly damage their shipping, the central ingredient in their economic success. Of course, the Navigation Act would hurt England's economy as well, mainly because it would rob England of the benefits of free trade. "The act of navigation," Smith wrote, "is not favorable to foreign commerce, or to the growth of that opulence that can arise from it." Nevertheless, Smith considered the legislation "the wisest of all the commercial regulations of England" because it did more damage to the Dutch economy than to the English economy, and in the mid-seventeenth century Holland was "the only naval power which could endanger the security of England."<sup>43</sup>

## CREATING WORLD ORDER

The claim is sometimes made that great powers can transcend realist logic by working together to build an international order that fosters peace and justice. World peace, it would appear, can only enhance a state's prosperity and security. America's political leaders paid considerable lip service to this line of argument over the course of the twentieth century. President Clinton, for example, told an audience at the United Nations in September 1993 that "at the birth of this organization 48 years ago . . . a generation of gifted leaders from many nations stepped forward to organize the world's efforts on behalf of security and prosperity. . . . Now history has granted to

us a moment of even greater opportunity. . . . Let us resolve that we will dream larger. . . . Let us ensure that the world we pass to our children is healthier, safer and more abundant than the one we inhabit today."<sup>44</sup>

This rhetoric notwithstanding, great powers do not work together to promote world order for its own sake. Instead, each seeks to maximize its own share of world power, which is likely to clash with the goal of creating and sustaining stable international orders.<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that great powers never aim to prevent wars and keep the peace. On the contrary, they work hard to deter wars in which they would be the likely victim. In such cases, however, state behavior is driven largely by narrow calculations about relative power, not by a commitment to build a world order independent of a state's own interests. The United States, for example, devoted enormous resources to deterring the Soviet Union from starting a war in Europe during the Cold War, not because of some deep-seated commitment to promoting peace around the world, but because American leaders feared that a Soviet victory would lead to a dangerous shift in the balance of power.<sup>46</sup>

The particular international order that obtains at any time is mainly a by-product of the self-interested behavior of the system's great powers. The configuration of the system, in other words, is the unintended consequence of great-power security competition, not the result of states acting together to organize peace. The establishment of the Cold War order in Europe illustrates this point. Neither the Soviet Union nor the United States intended to establish it, nor did they work together to create it. In fact, each superpower worked hard in the early years of the Cold War to gain power at the expense of the other, while preventing the other from doing likewise.<sup>47</sup> The system that emerged in Europe in the aftermath of World War II was the unplanned consequence of intense security competition between the superpowers.

Although that intense superpower rivalry ended along with the Cold War in 1990, Russia and the United States have not worked together to create the present order in Europe. The United States, for example, has rejected out of hand various Russian proposals to make the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe the central organizing pillar of

Russia was deeply opposed to NATO expansion, which it viewed as a serious threat to Russian security. Recognizing that Russia's weakness would preclude any retaliation, however, the United States ignored Russia's concerns and pushed NATO to accept the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland as new members. Russia has also opposed U.S. policy in the Balkans over the past decade, especially NATO's 1999 war against Yugoslavia. Again, the United States has paid little attention to Russia's concerns and has taken the steps it deems necessary to bring peace to that volatile region. Finally, it is worth noting that although Russia is dead set against allowing the United States to deploy ballistic missile defenses, it is highly likely that Washington will deploy such a system if it is judged to be technologically feasible.

For sure, great-power rivalry will sometimes produce a stable international order, as happened during the Cold War. Nevertheless, the great powers will continue looking for opportunities to increase their share of world power, and if a favorable situation arises, they will move to undermine that stable order. Consider how hard the United States worked during the late 1980s to weaken the Soviet Union and bring down the stable order that had emerged in Europe during the latter part of the Cold War.<sup>48</sup> Of course, the states that stand to lose power will work to deter aggression and preserve the existing order. But their motives will be selfish, revolving around balance-of-power logic, not some commitment to world peace.

Great powers cannot commit themselves to the pursuit of a peaceful world order for two reasons. First, states are unlikely to agree on a general formula for bolstering peace. Certainly, international relations scholars have never reached a consensus on what the blueprint should look like. In fact, it seems there are about as many theories on the causes of war and peace as there are scholars studying the subject. But more important, policymakers are unable to agree on how to create a stable world. For example, at the Paris Peace Conference after World War I, important differences over how to create stability in Europe divided Georges Clemenceau, David Lloyd George, and Woodrow Wilson.<sup>49</sup> In particular, Clemenceau was determined to impose harsher terms on Germany over the Rhineland than was either Lloyd George or Wilson, while Lloyd George stood out as the hard-liner on German reparations. The Treaty of Versailles, not surprisingly, did little to promote European stability.

Furthermore, consider American thinking on how to achieve stability in Europe in the early days of the Cold War.<sup>50</sup> The key elements for a stable and durable system were in place by the early 1950s. They included the division of Germany, the positioning of American ground forces in Western Europe to deter a Soviet attack, and ensuring that West Germany would not seek to develop nuclear weapons. Officials in the Truman administration, however, disagreed about whether a divided Germany would be a source of peace or war. For example, George Kennan and Paul Nitze, who held important positions in the State Department, believed that a divided Germany would be a source of instability, whereas Secretary of State Dean Acheson disagreed with them. In the 1950s, President Eisenhower sought to end the American commitment to defend Western Europe and to provide West Germany with its own nuclear deterrent. This policy, which was never fully adopted, nevertheless caused significant instability in Europe, as it led directly to the Berlin crises of 1958–59 and 1961.<sup>51</sup>

Second, great powers cannot put aside power considerations and work to promote international peace because they cannot be sure that their efforts will succeed. If their attempt fails, they are likely to pay a steep price for having neglected the balance of power, because if an aggressor appears at the door there will be no answer when they dial 911. That is a risk few states are willing to run. Therefore, prudence dictates that they behave according to realist logic. This line of reasoning accounts for why collective security schemes, which call for states to put aside narrow concerns about the balance of power and instead act in accordance with the broader interests of the international community, invariably die at birth.<sup>52</sup>

## COOPERATION AMONG STATES

One might conclude from the preceding discussion that my theory does not allow for any cooperation among the great powers. But this conclusion would be wrong. States can co-operate, although cooperation is sometimes difficult to achieve and always difficult to sustain. Two factors inhibit cooperation: considerations about relative gains and concern about

cheating.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, great powers live in a fundamentally competitive world where they view each other as real, or at least potential, enemies, and they therefore look to gain power at each other's expense.

Any two states contemplating cooperation must consider how profits or gains will be distributed between them. They can think about the division in terms of either absolute or relative gains (recall the distinction made earlier between pursuing either absolute power or relative power; the concept here is the same). With absolute gains, each side is concerned with maximizing its own profits and cares little about how much the other side gains or loses in the deal. Each side cares about the other only to the extent that the other side's behavior affects its own prospects for achieving maximum profits. With relative gains, on the other hand, each side considers not only its own individual gain, but also how well it fares compared to the other side.

Because great powers care deeply about the balance of power, their thinking focuses on relative gains when they consider cooperating with other states. For sure, each state tries to maximize its absolute gains; still, it is more important for a state to make sure that it does no worse, and perhaps better, than the other state in any agreement. Cooperation is more difficult to achieve, however, when states are attuned to relative gains rather than absolute gains.<sup>54</sup> This is because states concerned about absolute gains have to make sure that if the pie is expanding, they are getting at least some portion of the increase, whereas states that worry about relative gains must pay careful attention to how the pie is divided, which complicates cooperative efforts.

Concerns about cheating also hinder cooperation. Great powers are often reluctant to enter into cooperative agreements for fear that the other side will cheat on the agreement and gain a significant advantage. This concern is especially acute in the military realm, causing a "special peril of defection," because the nature of military weaponry allows for rapid shifts in the balance of power.<sup>55</sup> Such a development could create a window of opportunity for the state that cheats to inflict a decisive defeat on its victim.

These barriers to cooperation notwithstanding, great powers do cooperate in a realist world. Balance-of-power logic often causes great powers to

form alliances and cooperate against common enemies. The United Kingdom, France, and Russia, for example, were allies against Germany before and during World War I. States sometimes cooperate to gang up on a third state, as Germany and the Soviet Union did against Poland in 1939.<sup>56</sup> More recently, Serbia and Croatia agreed to conquer and divide Bosnia between them, although the United States and its European allies prevented them from executing their agreement.<sup>57</sup> Rivals as well as allies cooperate. After all, deals can be struck that roughly reflect the distribution of power and satisfy concerns about cheating. The various arms control agreements signed by the superpowers during the Cold War illustrate this point.

The bottom line, however, is that cooperation takes place in a world that is competitive at its core—one where states have powerful incentives to take advantage of other states. This point is graphically highlighted by the state of European politics in the forty years before World War I. The great powers cooperated frequently during this period, but that did not stop them from going to war on August 1, 1914.<sup>58</sup> The United States and the Soviet Union also cooperated considerably during World War II, but that cooperation did not prevent the outbreak of the Cold War shortly after Germany and Japan were defeated. Perhaps most amazingly, there was significant economic and military cooperation between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during the two years before the Wehrmacht attacked the Red Army.<sup>59</sup> No amount of cooperation can eliminate the dominating logic of security competition. Genuine peace, or a world in which states do not compete for power, is not likely as long as the state system remains anarchic.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, my argument is that the structure of the international system, not the particular characteristics of individual great powers, causes them to think and act offensively and to seek hegemony.<sup>60</sup> I do not adopt Morgenthau's claim that states invariably behave aggressively because they have a will to power hardwired into them. Instead, I assume that the prin-

cial motive behind great-power behavior is survival. In anarchy, however, the desire to survive encourages states to behave aggressively. Nor does my theory classify states as more or less aggressive on the basis of their economic or political systems. Offensive realism makes only a handful of assumptions about great powers, and these assumptions apply equally to all great powers. Except for differences in how much power each state controls, the theory treats all states alike.

I have now laid out the logic explaining why states seek to gain as much power as possible over their rivals. I have said little, however, about the object of that pursuit: power itself. The next two chapters provide a detailed discussion of this important subject.

### T H R E E

## Wealth and Power

**P**ower lies at the heart of international politics, yet there is considerable disagreement about what power is and how to measure it. In this chapter and the next, I define power and offer rough but reliable ways to measure it. Specifically, I argue that power is based on the particular material capabilities that a state possesses. The balance of power, therefore, is a function of tangible assets—such as armored divisions and nuclear weapons—that each great power controls.

States have two kinds of power: latent power and military power. These two forms of power are closely related but not synonymous, because they are derived from different kinds of assets. Latent power refers to the socio-economic ingredients that go into building military power; it is largely based on a state's wealth and the overall size of its population. Great powers need money, technology, and personnel to build military forces and to fight wars, and a state's latent power refers to the raw potential it can draw on when competing with rival states.

In international politics, however, a state's effective power is ultimately a function of its military forces and how they compare with the military forces of rival states. The United States and the Soviet Union were the most powerful states in the world during the Cold War because their military establishments dwarfed those of other states. Japan is not a great



## NINE

# The Causes of Great Power War

**S**ecurity competition is endemic to daily life in the international system, but war is not. Only occasionally does security competition give way to war. This chapter will offer a structural theory that accounts for that deadly shift. In effect, I seek to explain the causes of great-power war, defined as any conflict involving at least one great power.

One might surmise that international anarchy is the key structural factor that causes states to fight wars. After all, the best way for states to survive in an anarchic system in which other states have some offensive capability and intentions that might be hostile is to have more rather than less power. This logic, explained in Chapter 2, drives states to strive to maximize their share of world power, which sometimes means going to war against a rival state. There is no question that anarchy is a deep cause of war. G. Lowes Dickinson put this point well in his account of what caused World War I: "Some one state at any moment may be the immediate offender, but the main and permanent offence is common to all states. It is the anarchy which they are all responsible for perpetuating."<sup>1</sup>

Anarchy alone, however, cannot account for why security competition sometimes leads to war but sometimes does not. The problem is that anarchy is a constant—the system is always anarchic—whereas war

is not. To account for this important variation in state behavior, it is necessary to consider another structural variable: the distribution of power among the leading states in the system. As discussed in Chapter 8, power in the international system is usually arranged in three different ways: bipolarity, balanced multipolarity, and unbalanced multipolarity. Thus, to explore the effect of the distribution of power on the likelihood of war, we need to know whether the system is bipolar or multipolar, and if it is multipolar, whether or not there is a potential hegemon among the great powers. The core of my argument is that bipolar systems tend to be the most peaceful, and unbalanced multipolar systems are the most prone to deadly conflict. Balanced multipolar systems fall somewhere in between.

Structural theories such as offensive realism are at best crude predictors of when security competition leads to war. They are not capable of explaining precisely how often war will occur in one kind of system compared to another. Nor are they capable of predicting exactly when wars will occur. For example, according to offensive realism, the emergence of Germany as a potential hegemon in the early 1900s made it likely that there would be a war involving all the European great powers. But the theory cannot explain why war occurred in 1914 rather than 1912 or 1916.<sup>2</sup>

These limitations stem from the fact that nonstructural factors sometimes play an important role in determining whether or not a state goes to war. States usually do not fight wars for security reasons alone. As noted in Chapter 2, for instance, although Otto von Bismarck was driven in good part by realist calculations when he took Prussia to war three times between 1864 and 1870, each of his decisions for war was also influenced by nationalism and other domestic political calculations. And yet structural forces do exert a powerful influence on state behavior. It can be no other way if states care deeply about their survival. Thus, focusing exclusively on structure should tell us a lot about the origins of great-power war.

Many theories about the causes of war have been propounded, which is not surprising, since the subject has always been of central importance



to students of international politics. Some of those theories treat human nature as the taproot of conflict, while others focus on individual leaders, domestic politics, political ideology, capitalism, economic interdependence, and the structure of the international system.<sup>3</sup> In fact, a handful of prominent theories point to the distribution of power as the key to understanding international conflict. For example, Kenneth Waltz maintains that bipolarity is less prone to war than multipolarity, whereas Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer argue the opposite.<sup>4</sup> Other scholars focus not on the polarity of the system, but on whether there is a preponderant power in the system. Classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau argue that peace is most likely when there is no dominant power, but instead a rough balance of power among the leading states. In contrast, Robert Gilpin and A.F.K. Organski argue that the presence of a preponderant power fosters stability.<sup>5</sup>

Offensive realism, which takes into account polarity as well as the balance of power among the leading states in the system, agrees that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity but goes beyond that assertion by distinguishing between multipolar systems with or without a potential hegemon. This distinction between balanced and unbalanced multipolar systems, I argue, is important for understanding the history of great-power war. Offensive realism also agrees with the classical realists' claim that peace is more likely if there is no preponderant power in the system, but it goes beyond that perspective by emphasizing that stability also depends on whether the system is bipolar or multipolar.

Showing how offensive realism explains great-power war involves a two-step process. In the next three sections, I spell out my theory and show that the causal logic underpinning it is sound and compelling. In the subsequent two sections, the theory is tested to see how well it explains both the outbreak of great-power war and the periods of relative peace in Europe between 1792 and 1990. Specifically, I look to see how much great-power war there was during the periods when Europe was characterized by bipolarity, by balanced multipolarity, and by unbalanced multipolarity. Finally, my brief conclusion discusses how the presence of nuclear weapons during the Cold War affects the analysis.

## STRUCTURE AND WAR

The main causes of war are located in the architecture of the international system. What matters most is the number of great powers and how much power each controls. A system can be either bipolar or multipolar, and power can be distributed more or less evenly among the leading states. The power ratios among all the great powers affect the prospects for stability, but the key ratio is that between the two most formidable states in the system. If there is a lopsided power gap, the number one state is a potential hegemon.<sup>6</sup> A system that contains an aspiring hegemon is said to be unbalanced; a system without such a dominant state is said to be balanced. Power need not be distributed equally among all the major states in a balanced system, although it can be. The basic requirement for balance is that there not be a marked difference in power between the two leading states. If there is, the system is unbalanced.

Combining these two dimensions of power produces four possible kinds of systems: 1) unbalanced bipolarity, 2) balanced bipolarity, 3) unbalanced multipolarity, and 4) balanced multipolarity. Unbalanced bipolarity is not a useful category, because this kind of system is unlikely to be found in the real world. I know of none in modern times. It is certainly possible that some region might find itself with just two great powers, one of which is markedly more powerful than the other. But that system is likely to disappear quickly, because the stronger state is likely to conquer its weaker rival, who would have no other great power to turn to for help, since by definition there are no other great powers. In fact, the weaker power might even capitulate without a fight, making the more powerful state a regional hegemon. In short, unbalanced bipolar systems are so unstable that they cannot last for any appreciable period of time.

Thus we are likely to find power apportioned among the leading states in three different patterns. Bipolar systems (this is shorthand for balanced bipolarity) are ruled by two great powers that have roughly equal strength—or at least neither state is decidedly more powerful than the other. Unbalanced multipolar systems are dominated by three or more

great powers, one of which is a potential hegemon. Balanced multipolar systems are dominated by three or more great powers, none of which is an aspiring hegemon: there is no significant gap in military strength between the system's leading two states, although some power asymmetries are likely to exist among the great powers.

How do these different distributions of power affect the prospects for war and peace? Bipolar systems are the most stable of the three systems. Great-power wars are infrequent, and when they occur, they are likely to involve one of the great powers fighting against a minor power, not the rival great power. Unbalanced multipolar systems feature the most dangerous distribution of power, mainly because potential hegemons are likely to get into wars with all of the other great powers in the system. These wars invariably turn out to be long and enormously costly. Balanced multipolar systems occupy a middle ground: great-power war is more likely than in bipolarity, but decidedly less likely than in unbalanced multipolarity. Moreover, the wars between the great powers are likely to be one-on-one or two-on-one engagements, not systemwide conflicts like those that occur when there is a potential hegemon.

Let us now consider why bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar systems, regardless of whether there is a potential hegemon in the mix. Later I will explain why balanced multipolar systems are more stable than unbalanced ones.

## BIPOLARITY VS. MULTIPOLARITY

**W**ar is more likely in multipolarity than bipolarity for three reasons.<sup>7</sup> First, there are more opportunities for war, because there are more potential conflict dyads in a multipolar system. Second, imbalances of power are more commonplace in a multipolar world, and thus great powers are more likely to have the capability to win a war, making deterrence more difficult and war more likely. Third, the potential for miscalculation is greater in multipolarity: states might think they have the capability to coerce or conquer another state when, in fact, they do not.

### Opportunities for War

A multipolar system has more potential conflict situations than does a bipolar order. Consider great-great power dyads. Under bipolarity, there are only two great powers and therefore only one conflict dyad directly involving them. For example, the Soviet Union was the only great power that the United States could have fought during the Cold War. In contrast, a multipolar system with three great powers has three dyads across which war might break out between the great powers: A can fight B, A can fight C, and B can fight C. A system with five great powers has ten great-great power dyads.

Conflict could also erupt across dyads involving major and minor powers. In setting up a hypothetical scenario, it seems reasonable to assume the same number of minor powers in both the bipolar and multipolar systems, since the number of major powers should have no meaningful effect on the number of minor powers. Therefore, because there are more great powers in multipolarity, there are more great-minor power dyads. Consider the following examples: in a bipolar world with 10 minor powers, there are 20 great-minor power dyads; in a multipolar system with 5 great powers and the same 10 minor powers, there are 50 such dyads.

This disparity in the number of great-minor power dyads in the two systems probably should be tilted further in favor of bipolarity, because it is generally less flexible than multipolarity. Bipolar systems are likely to be rigid structures. Two great powers dominate, and the logic of security competition suggests that they will be unambiguous rivals. Most minor powers find it difficult to remain unattached to one of the major powers in bipolarity, because the major powers demand allegiance from the smaller states. This tightness is especially true in core geographical areas, less so in peripheral areas. The pulling of minor powers into the orbit of one or the other great power makes it difficult for either great power to pick a fight with minor powers closely allied with its adversary; as a result, the numbers of potential conflict situations is substantially less. During the Cold War, for example, the United States was not about to use military

force against Hungary or Poland, which were allied with the Soviet Union. Thus, there should probably be substantially fewer than 20 great-minor power dyads in our hypothetical bipolar world.

In contrast, multipolar systems are less firmly structured. The exact form multipolarity takes can vary widely, depending on the number of major and minor powers in the system and the geographical arrangement of those states. Nevertheless, both major and minor powers usually have considerable flexibility regarding alliance partners, and minor powers are less likely to be closely tied to a great power than in a bipolar system. This autonomy, however, leaves minor powers vulnerable to attack from the great powers. Thus, the 50 great-minor power dyads in our hypothetical multipolar system is probably a reasonable number.

Wars between minor powers are largely ignored in this study because the aim is to develop a theory of great-power war. Yet minor-power wars sometimes widen and great powers get dragged into the fighting. Although the subject of escalation lies outside the scope of this study, a brief word is in order about how polarity affects the likelihood of great powers' getting pulled into wars between minor powers. Basically, that possibility is greater in multipolarity than in bipolarity, because there are more opportunities for minor powers to fight each other in multipolarity, and thus more opportunities for great-power involvement.

Consider that our hypothetical bipolar and multipolar worlds both contain 10 minor powers, which means that there are 45 potential minor-minor power dyads in each system. That number should be markedly reduced for bipolarity, because the general tightness of bipolar systems makes it difficult for minor powers to go to war against each other. Specifically, both great powers would seek to prevent fighting between their own minor-power allies, as well as conflicts involving minor powers from the rival camps, for fear of escalation. Minor powers have much more room to maneuver in a multipolar system, and thus they have more freedom to fight each other. Greece and Turkey, for example, fought a war between 1921 and 1924, when Europe was multipolar. But they were in no position to fight with each other during the Cold War, when Europe was bipolar, because the United States would not have tolerated a war

between any of its European allies, for fear it would have weakened NATO vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

### Imbalances of Power

Power asymmetries among the great powers are more commonplace in multipolarity than bipolarity, and the strong become hard to deter when power is unbalanced, because they have increased capability to win wars.<sup>8</sup> But even if we assume that the military strength of the great powers is roughly equal, power imbalances that lead to conflict are still more likely in multipolarity than in bipolarity.

Multipolar systems tend toward inequality, whereas bipolar systems tend toward equality, for one principal reason. The more great powers there are in a system, the more likely it is that wealth and population size, the building blocks of military power, will be distributed unevenly among them. To illustrate, let us assume that we live in a world where, regardless of how many great powers populate the system, there is a 50 percent chance that any two great powers will have roughly the same amount of latent power. If there are only two great powers in that world (bipolarity), obviously there is a 50 percent chance that each state will control the same quantity of latent power. But if there are three great powers in that world (multipolarity), there is only a 12.5 percent chance that all of them will have the same amount of latent power. With four great powers (multipolarity), there is less than a 2 percent chance that the ingredients of military might will be distributed evenly among all of them.

One could use a different number for the likelihood that any two states will have equal amounts of latent power—say, 25 percent or 60 percent instead of 50 percent—but the basic story would remain the same. Asymmetries in latent power are more likely to be found among the great powers in multipolarity than in bipolarity, and the more great powers there are in multipolarity, the more remote the chances of symmetry. This is not to say that it is impossible to have a multipolar system in which the great powers possess equal proportions of latent power, but only that it is considerably less likely than in a bipolar system. Of course, the reason for

this concern with latent power is that significant variations in wealth and population size among the leading states are likely to lead to disparities in actual military power, simply because some states will be better endowed to pursue an arms race than are others.<sup>9</sup>

But even if we assume that all the major states are equally powerful, imbalances in power still occur more often in multipolarity than in bipolarity. Two great powers in a multipolar system, for example, can join together to attack a third great power, as the United Kingdom and France did against Russia in the Crimean War (1853–56), and Italy and Prussia did against Austria in 1866. This kind of ganging up is impossible in bipolarity, since only two great powers compete. Two great powers can also join forces to conquer a minor power, as Austria and Prussia did against Denmark in 1864, and Germany and the Soviet Union did against Poland in 1939. Ganging up of this sort is logically possible in a bipolar world, but it is highly unlikely because the two great powers are almost certain to be archrivals disinclined to go to war as allies. Furthermore, a major power might use its superior strength to coerce or conquer a minor power. This kind of behavior is more likely in multipolarity than in bipolarity, because there are more potential great-minor power dyads in a multipolar system.

One might argue that balance-of-power dynamics can operate to counter any power imbalances that arise in multipolarity. No state can dominate another if the other states coalesce firmly against it.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this might be seen as an advantage that multipolarity has over bipolarity, since great-power balancing coalitions are not feasible in a world with only two great powers. But threatened states rarely form effective balancing coalitions in time to contain an aggressor. As Chapter 8 demonstrated, threatened states prefer buck-passing to balancing, but buck-passing directly undermines efforts to build powerful balancing coalitions.

But even when threatened states do balance together in multipolarity, diplomacy is an uncertain process. It can take time to build a defensive coalition, especially if the number of states required to form a balancing alliance is large. An aggressor may conclude that it can gain its objectives before the opposing coalition is fully formed. Finally, geography sometimes prevents balancing states from putting meaningful pressure on

aggressors. For example, a major power may not be able to put effective military pressure on a state threatening to cause trouble because they are separated from each other by a large body of water or another state.<sup>11</sup>

### The Potential for Miscalculation

A final problem with multipolarity lies in its tendency to foster miscalculation. Multipolarity leads states to underestimate the resolve of rival states and the strength of opposing coalitions. States then mistakenly conclude that they have the military capability to coerce an opponent, or if that fails, to defeat it in battle.

War is more likely when a state underestimates the willingness of an opposing state to stand firm on issues of difference. It then may push the other state too far, expecting the other to concede when in fact it will choose to fight. Such miscalculation is more likely under multipolarity because the shape of the international order tends to remain fluid, due to the tendency of coalitions to shift. As a result, the nature of the agreed international rules of the road—norms of state behavior, and agreed divisions of territorial rights and other privileges—tend to change constantly. No sooner may the rules of a given adversarial relationship be worked out than that relationship becomes a friendship, a new rivalry emerges with a previous friend or neutral, and new rules of the road must be established. Under these circumstances, one state may unwittingly push another too far, because ambiguities as to national rights and obligations leave a wider range of issues on which each state may misjudge the other's resolve. Norms of state behavior can come to be broadly understood and accepted by all states, even in multipolarity, just as basic norms of diplomatic conduct became generally accepted by the European powers during the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, a well-defined division of rights is generally more difficult when the number of states is large and relations among them are in flux, as is the case with multipolarity.

War is also more likely when states underestimate the relative power of an opposing coalition, either because they underestimate the number of states who will oppose them, or because they exaggerate the number of

allies who will fight on their own side.<sup>12</sup> Such errors are more likely in a system of many states, since states then must accurately predict the behavior of many other states in order to calculate the balance of power between coalitions. Even assuming that a state knows who is going to fight with and against it, measuring the military strength of multistate coalitions is considerably more difficult than assessing the power of a single rival.

Miscalculation is less likely in a bipolar world. States are less likely to miscalculate others' resolve, because the rules of the road with the main opponent become settled over time, leading both parties to recognize the limits beyond which they cannot push the other. States also cannot miscalculate the membership of the opposing coalition, since each side faces only one main enemy. Simplicity breeds certainty; certainty bolsters peace.

### BALANCED VS. UNBALANCED MULTIPOLARITY

Unbalanced multipolar systems are especially war-prone for two reasons. The potential hegemons, which are the defining feature of this kind of system, have an appreciable power advantage over the other great powers, which means that they have good prospects of winning wars against their weaker rivals. One might think that a marked power asymmetry of this sort would decrease the prospects for war. After all, being so powerful should make the potential hegemon feel secure and thus should ameliorate the need to initiate a war to gain more power. Moreover, the lesser powers should recognize that the leading state is essentially a status quo power and relax. But even if they fail to recognize the dominant power's benign intentions, the fact is that they do not have the military capability to challenge it. Therefore, according to this logic, the presence of a potential hegemon in a multipolar system should enhance the prospects for peace.

This is not what happens, however, when potential hegemons come on the scene. Their considerable military might notwithstanding, they are not

likely to be satisfied with the balance of power. Instead they will aim to acquire more power and eventually gain regional hegemony, because hegemony is the ultimate form of security; there are no meaningful security threats to the dominant power in a unipolar system. Of course, not only do potential hegemons have a powerful incentive to rule their region, they also have the capability to push for supremacy, which means that they are a dangerous threat to peace.

Potential hegemons also invite war by increasing the level of fear among the great powers.<sup>13</sup> Fear is endemic to states in the international system, and it drives them to compete for power so that they can increase their prospects for survival in a dangerous world. The emergence of a potential hegemon, however, makes the other great powers especially fearful, and they will search hard for ways to correct the imbalance of power and will be inclined to pursue riskier policies toward that end. The reason is simple: when one state is threatening to dominate the rest, the long-term value of remaining at peace declines and threatened states will be more willing to take chances to improve their security.

A potential hegemon does not have to do much to generate fear among the other states in the system. Its formidable capabilities alone are likely to scare neighboring great powers and push at least some of them to create a balancing coalition against their dangerous opponent. Because a state's intentions are difficult to discern, and because they can change quickly, rival great powers will be inclined to assume the worst about the potential hegemon's intentions, further reinforcing the threatened states' incentive to contain it and maybe even weaken it if the opportunity presents itself.

The target of this containment strategy, however, is sure to view any balancing coalition forming against it as encirclement by its rivals. The potential hegemon would be correct to think this way, even though the lesser great powers' purpose is essentially defensive in nature. Nevertheless, the leading state is likely to feel threatened and scared and consequently is likely to take steps to enhance its security, thereby making the neighboring great powers more scared, and forcing them to take additional steps to enhance their security, which then scares the potential hegemon even

more, and so on. In short, potential hegemonous generate spirals of fear that are hard to control. This problem is compounded by the fact that they possess considerable power and thus are likely to think they can solve their security problems by going to war.

### Summary

Thus, bipolarity is the most stable of the different architectures, for four reasons. First, there are relatively fewer opportunities for conflict in bipolarity, and only one possible conflict dyad involving the great powers. When great powers do fight in bipolarity, they are likely to engage minor powers, not the rival great power. Second, power is more likely to be equally distributed among the great powers in bipolarity, an important structural source of stability. Furthermore, there is limited opportunity for the great powers to gang up against other states or take advantage of minor powers. Third, bipolarity discourages miscalculation and thus reduces the likelihood that the great powers will stumble into war. Fourth, although fear is constantly at play in world politics, bipolarity does not magnify those anxieties that haunt states.

Balanced multipolarity is more prone to war than is bipolarity, for three reasons. First, multipolarity presents considerably more opportunities for conflict, especially between the great powers themselves. Wars that simultaneously involve all the great powers, however, are unlikely. Second, power is likely to be distributed unevenly among the leading states, and those states with greater military capability will be prone to start wars, because they will think that they have the capability to win them. There will also be ample opportunity for great powers to gang up on third parties and to coerce or conquer minor powers. Third, miscalculation is likely to be a serious problem in balanced multipolarity, although high levels of fear among the great powers are unlikely, because there are no exceptional power gaps between the leading states in the system.

Unbalanced multipolarity is the most perilous distribution of power. Not only does it have all the problems of balanced multipolarity, it also

suffers from the worst kind of inequality: the presence of a potential hegemon. That state both has significant capability to cause trouble and spawns high levels of fear among the great powers. Both of those developments increase the likelihood of war, which is likely to involve all the great powers in the system and be especially costly.

Now that the theory about the causes of war has been presented, let us switch gears and consider how well it explains events in Europe between 1792 and 1990.

### GREAT-POWER WAR IN MODERN EUROPE, 1792-1990

**T**o test offensive realism's claims about how different distributions of power affect the likelihood of great-power war, it is necessary to identify the periods between 1792 and 1990 when Europe was either bipolar or multipolar, and when there was a potential hegemon in those multipolar systems. It is then necessary to identify the great-power wars for each of those periods.

System structure, we know, is a function of the number of great powers and how power is apportioned among them. The list of European great powers for the two centuries under discussion includes Austria, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Russia.<sup>14</sup> Only Russia, which was known as the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1990, was a great power for the entire period. Austria, which became Austria-Hungary in 1867, was a great power from 1792 until its demise in 1918. Great Britain and Germany were great powers from 1792 until 1945, although Germany was actually Prussia before 1871. Italy is considered a great power from 1861 until its collapse in 1943.

What about Japan and the United States, which are not located in Europe, but were great powers for part of the relevant period? Japan, which was a great power from 1895 until 1945, is left out of the subsequent analysis because it was never a major player in European politics. Japan declared war against Germany at the start of World War I, but other than taking a few German possessions in Asia, it remained on the side-

lines. Japan also sent troops into the Soviet Union during the last year of World War I, in conjunction with the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, who were trying to get the Soviet Union back into the war against Germany.<sup>15</sup> Japan, however, was mainly concerned with acquiring territory in Russia's Far East, not with events in Europe, about which it cared little. Regardless, the intervention was a failure.

The United States is a different matter. Although it is located in the Western Hemisphere, it committed military forces to fight in Europe during both world wars, and it has maintained a large military presence in the region since 1945. In those instances in which the United States accepted a continental commitment, it is considered a major actor in the European balance of power. But for reasons discussed in Chapter 7, America was never a potential hegemon in Europe; it acted instead as an offshore balancer. Much of the work on assessing the relative strength of the great powers during the years between 1792 and 1990, especially regarding the crucial question of whether there was a potential hegemon in Europe, was done in Chapter 8. The missing parts of the story are filled in below.

Based on the relevant distribution of power among the major states, European history from the outbreak of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in 1792 until the end of the Cold War in 1990 can be roughly divided into seven periods:

- 1) Napoleonic era I, 1792-93 (1 year), balanced multipolarity;
- 2) Napoleonic era II, 1793-1815 (22 years), unbalanced multipolarity;
- 3) Nineteenth century, 1815-1902 (88 years), balanced multipolarity;
- 4) Kaiserreich era, 1903-18 (16 years), unbalanced multipolarity;
- 5) Interwar years, 1919-38 (20 years), balanced multipolarity;
- 6) Nazi era, 1939-45 (6 years), unbalanced multipolarity; and
- 7) Cold War, 1945-90 (46 years), bipolarity.

The list of wars for each of these seven periods is drawn from Jack Levy's well-regarded database of great-power wars.<sup>16</sup> However, one minor adjustment was made to that database: I treat the Russo-Polish War

(1919-20) and the Russian Civil War (1918-21) as separate conflicts, whereas Levy treats them as part of the same war. Only wars that involved at least one European great power and were fought between European states are included in this analysis. Wars involving a European great power and a non-European state are excluded. Thus the War of 1812 between the United Kingdom and the United States, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), and the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-89) are omitted.<sup>17</sup> Also excluded are European wars involving only minor powers. Finally, civil wars are not included in the analysis, unless there was substantial outside intervention by at least one European state, as there was in the Russian Civil War. The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) is omitted, although it is a close call.

Great-power wars are broken down into three categories. "Central wars" involve virtually all of the great powers in the system, and the combatants fight with tremendous intensity.<sup>18</sup> "Great power vs. great power wars" involve either one-on-one or two-on-one fights. It should be noted that there is no difference between a central war and a great power vs. great power war in either a bipolar system or a multipolar system with three great powers. No such cases exist, however, in modern European history. Finally, there are "great power vs. minor power wars." During the 199-year period of European history under study, there were a total of 24 great-power wars, including 3 central wars, 6 great power vs. great power wars, and 15 great power vs. minor power wars.

### The Napoleonic Era, 1792-1815

Europe was home to five great powers between 1792 and 1815: Austria, Britain/United Kingdom, France, Prussia, and Russia. Although France was clearly the most powerful state during this period, it was not a potential hegemon until the early fall of 1793, because it did not have the most formidable army in Europe before then.<sup>19</sup> Remember that Austria and Prussia went to war against France in 1792 because it was militarily weak and therefore was considered vulnerable to invasion. France retained its exalted status as a potential hegemon until Napoleon was finally defeated in the



spring of 1815. Thus, there was balanced multipolarity in Europe from 1792 until 1793, and unbalanced multipolarity from 1793 until 1815.

The period from 1792 to 1815 was dominated by the *French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*. The first year of that conflict is categorized as a great power vs. great power war, because it involved only three great powers: Austria, France, and Prussia. Great Britain and Russia sat on the sidelines throughout 1792 and early 1793. The remaining twenty-two years of that conflict are categorized as a central war. France, which was attempting to become Europe's hegemon, fought against Austria, Britain, Prussia, and Russia—although in different combinations at different times.

There were also three great power vs. minor power wars in the Napoleonic era. The *Russo-Turkish War (1806–12)* was basically an attempt by Russia to take Bessarabia, Moldavia, and Walachia away from Turkey, which was then called the Ottoman Empire. Russian victories in the last year of that war won Bessarabia, but not the other two regions. The *Russo-Swedish War (1808–9)* was caused by French and Russian unhappiness over Sweden's alliance with the United Kingdom. Russia and Denmark went to war against Sweden and were victorious. Sweden had to surrender Finland and the Åland Islands to Russia. The *Neapolitan War (1815)* was fought between Austria and Naples. In the wake of Napoleon's departure from Italy, Austria was determined to reassert its preeminence in the region, while the Neapolitan forces were bent on pushing Austria out of Italy. Austria won the conflict.

### The Nineteenth Century, 1815–1902

Six great powers populated the European system for this eighty-eight-year period between the final defeat of Napoleonic France and the rise of Wilhelmine Germany. Austria/Austria-Hungary, the United Kingdom, France, Prussia/Germany, and Russia were great powers for the entire period. Italy joined the club in 1861. There was no potential hegemon in Europe between 1815 and 1902. The United Kingdom was clearly the wealthiest state in Europe during that period (see Table 3.3), but it never translated its abundant wealth into military might. In fact, the United

Kingdom maintained a small and weak army for most of the period in question. The largest armies in Europe between 1815 and 1860 belonged to Austria, France, and Russia, but none of them possessed an army that was powerful enough to overrun Europe (see Tables 9.1 and 9.2).<sup>20</sup> Nor did any of them come close to having enough latent power to qualify as a potential hegemon.

The Prussian army became a formidable fighting force in the 1860s, vying with the Austrian and French armies for the number one ranking in Europe.<sup>21</sup> France occupied that position for the first half of the decade; Prussia held it for the second half. There is little doubt that Germany had the strongest army in Europe between 1870 and 1902, but it was not yet so powerful that it was a threat to the entire continent. Furthermore, Germany did not yet have sufficient wealth to qualify as a potential hegemon. Thus, it seems fair to say that there was balanced multipolarity in Europe during the nineteenth century.

There were four great power vs. great power wars between 1815 and 1902. The *Crimean War (1853–56)* was initially a war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, with the former trying to make territorial gains at the expense of the latter. But the United Kingdom and France entered the war on the Ottoman Empire's side. Russia was defeated and was forced to make minor territorial concessions. In the *War of Italian Unification (1859)*, France joined forces with Piedmont to drive Austria out of Italy and create a unified Italian state. Austria lost the war and Italy came into being shortly thereafter. In the *Austro-Prussian War (1866)*, Prussia and Italy were arrayed against Austria. Prussia and Austria were essentially fighting to determine which one of them would dominate a unified Germany, while Italy was bent on taking territory from Austria. Austria lost and Prussia made substantial territorial gains at Austria's expense. But German unification was still not completed. The *Franco-Prussian War (1870–71)* was ostensibly fought over Prussian interference in Spain's politics. In fact, Bismarck wanted the war so he could complete German unification, while France wanted territorial compensation to offset Prussia's gains in 1866. The Prussian army won a decisive victory.



TABLE 9.1

**Manpower in European Armies, 1820-58**

|                | 1820    | 1830    | 1840    | 1850    | 1858    |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Austria        | 258,000 | 273,000 | 267,000 | 434,000 | 403,000 |
| United Kingdom | 114,513 | 104,066 | 124,659 | 136,932 | 200,000 |
| France         | 208,000 | 224,000 | 275,000 | 391,190 | 400,000 |
| Prussia        | 130,000 | 130,000 | 135,000 | 131,000 | 153,000 |
| Russia         | 772,000 | 826,000 | 623,000 | 871,000 | 870,000 |

SOURCES: Figures for Austria, Prussia, and Russia are from J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *National Material Capabilities Data, 1816-1985* (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, February 1993). Figures for the United Kingdom are from Edward Spiers, *The Army and Society, 1815-1914* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 36, except for 1858, which is the author's estimate. Figures for France in 1820 and 1830 are from Singer and Small, *National Material Capabilities*, France in 1840 is from William C. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 239. France in 1850 is from André Corvisier, ed., *Histoire Militaire de la France*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), p. 413. France in 1858 (the actual year is 1857) is from Michael Stephen Partridge, *Military Planning for the Defense of the United Kingdom, 1814-1870* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1989), p. 76. The year 1858 was chosen instead of 1860 because the War of Italian Unification distorted the numbers for 1860, especially for France.

TABLE 9.2

**Manpower in European Armies, 1853-56 (Crimean War)**

|                | 1853    | 1854      | 1855      | 1856      |
|----------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Austria        | 514,000 | 540,000   | 427,000   | 427,000   |
| United Kingdom | 149,089 | 152,780   | 168,552   | 168,552   |
| France         | 332,549 | 310,267   | 507,432   | 526,056   |
| Prussia        | 139,000 | 139,000   | 142,000   | 142,000   |
| Russia         | 761,000 | 1,100,000 | 1,843,463 | 1,742,000 |

SOURCES: Figures for Austria and Prussia are from Singer and Small, *National Material Capabilities Data*. The figures for the United Kingdom are as follows: 1853-54, Hew Strachan, *Wellington's Legacy: The Reform of the British Army, 1830-54* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 182; 1855-56, Spiers, *Army and Society*, p. 36. Figures for France are from Corvisier, ed., *Histoire Militaire*, p. 413. Figures for Russia, 1853-54 are from Singer and Small, *National Material Capabilities Data*, while those for 1855-56 are from David R. Stone, "The Soviet National Defense Tradition," in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 10, 1987, p. 1.

There were also eight great power vs. minor power wars during the nineteenth century. The *Franco-Spanish War* (1823) stemmed from a revolt in Spain that removed the reigning king from his throne. France intervened to restore peace and the monarchy. *Navarino Bay* (1827) was a brief naval engagement with the United Kingdom, France, and Russia on one side and the Ottoman Empire and Egypt on the other. The great powers were helping the Greeks gain their independence from the Ottoman Empire. In the *Russo-Turkish War* (1828-29), the Russians went to war against the Ottoman Empire to support Greek independence and to make territorial gains in the Caucasus and other places at the Ottoman Empire's expense. The *First Schleswig-Holstein War* (1848-49) was an unsuccessful effort by Prussia to take the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein away from Denmark and make them a German state.

In the *Austro-Sardinian War* (1848), the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia sought to drive Austria out of Italy and create a unified Italy under its own auspices. This attempt at liberation failed. The *Roman Republic War* (1849) broke out when France sent an army to Rome to restore the pope to power and crush the fledgling republic established there by Giuseppe Mazzini. In the *Second Schleswig-Holstein War* (1864), Austria and Prussia ganged up to finally take those disputed duchies away from Denmark. Finally, in the *Russo-Turkish War* (1877-78), Russia and Serbia sided with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria in their effort to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire.

**The Kaiserreich Era, 1903-18**

There was no change in the lineup of great powers after 1903. The same six great powers remained at the center of European politics, save for the fact that the United States became a major player in 1918, when American troops began arriving on the continent in large numbers. Wilhelmine Germany, as emphasized in Chapter 8, was a potential hegemon during this period; it controlled the mightiest army and the greatest amount of wealth in the region. Thus, there was unbalanced multipolarity in Europe from 1903 to 1918.

This period was dominated by *World War I* (1914–18), a central war involving all of the great powers and many of the minor powers in Europe. There was also one great power vs. great power war during this period. In the *Russian Civil War* (1918–21), the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and the United States sent troops into the Soviet Union in the midst of its civil war. They ended up fighting some brief but intense battles against the Bolsheviks, who nevertheless survived. Finally, there was one great power vs. minor power conflict during this period: the *Italo-Turkish War* (1911–12). Italy, which was bent on establishing an empire in the area around the Mediterranean Sea, invaded and conquered Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in North Africa, which were then provinces in the Ottoman Empire (both are part of Libya today).

### The Interwar Years, 1919–38

There were five great powers in the European system between the two world wars. Austria-Hungary disappeared at the close of World War I, but the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union remained intact. There was no potential hegemon in Europe during these two decades. The United Kingdom was the wealthiest state in Europe during the first few years after the war, but Germany regained the lead by the late 1920s (see Table 3.3). Neither the United Kingdom nor Germany, however, had the most powerful army in the region between 1919 and 1938.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, both states possessed especially weak armies throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. The German army certainly grew more powerful during the late 1930s, but it did not become the strongest army in Europe until 1939. Although it might seem difficult to believe given France's catastrophic defeat in 1940, France possessed the number one army in Europe during the interwar years. But France had nowhere near the wealth and population to be a potential hegemon. Thus, there was balanced multipolarity in Europe during this period.

There were no great power vs. great power wars between 1919 and 1938, but there was one war between a great power and a minor power. In the *Russo-Polish War* (1919–20), Poland invaded a badly weakened Soviet

Union in the wake of World War I, hoping to detach Belorussia and Ukraine from the Soviet Union and make them part of a Polish-led federation. Although Poland failed to achieve that goal, it did acquire some territory in Belorussia and Ukraine.

### The Nazi Era, 1939–45

This period began with the same five great powers that dominated the interwar years. But France was knocked out of the ranks of the great powers in the spring of 1940, and Italy went the same route in 1943. The United Kingdom, Germany, and the Soviet Union remained great powers until 1945. Also, the United States became deeply involved in European politics after it entered World War II in December 1941. As discussed in Chapter 8, Nazi Germany was a potential hegemon from 1939 until it collapsed in defeat in the spring of 1945. Thus, there was unbalanced multipolarity in Europe during this period.

*World War II* (1939–45), which was a central war, was obviously the dominating event in Europe during this period. There was also one great power vs. minor power war: the *Russo-Finnish War* (1939–40). In anticipation of a possible Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, Stalin had demanded territorial concessions from Finland in the fall of 1939. The Finns refused and the Red Army invaded Finland in late November 1939. Finland capitulated in March 1940 and the Soviet Union took the territory it wanted.

### The Cold War, 1945–90

There was only one great power left in Europe after World War II: the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> The United States, however, was determined to prevent the Soviets from dominating the region, so they maintained a massive military presence in Europe throughout the Cold War. This was the first time in its history that the United States stationed large numbers of troops in Europe during peacetime. Europe was therefore bipolar from 1945 to 1990.

There was no war between the two great powers during this period, but there was one great power vs. minor power war. In the *Russo-*

*Hungarian War (1956), the Soviet Union successfully intervened to put down an anticommunist revolt in Hungary.*

## ANALYSIS

Let us now sort this information to see how much great-power war there was in Europe when it was characterized by bipolarity, by balanced multipolarity, and by unbalanced multipolarity. In particular, let us consider the number of wars, the frequency of war, and the deadliness of the wars in each of those kinds of systems. The number of great-power wars in each period is broken down according to the three types of war described earlier: central, great power vs. great power, and great power vs. minor power. Frequency is determined by adding up the years in each period in which a great-power war was being fought. War need only be fought in some part of a year for that year to be counted as a war year. For example, the Crimean War ran from October 1853 until February 1856, and thus 1853, 1854, 1855, and 1856 are counted as war years. Finally, deadliness is measured by counting the number of military deaths in each conflict; civilian deaths are omitted.

Bipolarity seems to be the most peaceful and least deadly kind of architecture (see Table 9.3). Between 1945 and 1990, which was the only period during which Europe was bipolar, there was no war between the great powers. There was, however, one great power vs. minor power war, which lasted less than a month. Thus war took place in Europe during only one of the 46 years in which it was bipolar. Regarding deadliness, there were 10,000 deaths in that conflict.

Unbalanced multipolarity is by far the most war-prone and deadly distribution of power. During the periods when there was a potential hegemon in a multipolar Europe—1793–1815, 1903–18, 1939–45—there were three central wars, one great power vs. great power war, and five great power vs. minor power wars. A war was being fought during 35 of the relevant 44 years, and in 11 of those years two wars were going on at the same time. Finally, there were roughly 27 million military deaths in those

TABLE 9.3

### Summary of European Wars by System Structure, 1792–1990

|  | Number of wars |                 |                 | Frequency of wars |           |                     | Deadliness of wars   |
|--|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|----------------------|
|  | Central        | Great vs. great | Great vs. minor | Total years       | War years | % of years with war | Military deaths only |
| Bipolarity (1945–1990)                                 | 0              | 0               | 1               | 46                | 1         | 2.2%                | 10,000               |
| Unbalanced multipolarity (1792–1815, 1903–18, 1939–45) | 0              | 5               | 9               | 109               | 20        | 18.3%               | 1.2 million          |
| Balanced multipolarity (1815–1902, 1919–38)            | 3              | 1               | 5               | 44                | 35        | 79.5%               | 27 million           |

I could not find casualty data for the Russo-Turkish (1806–12) and the Russo-Swedish Wars (1808–9), both of which occurred during the Napoleonic Era, so I left them from the calculation. Nevertheless, the numbers of combat deaths for those wars are surely small and would hardly affect the huge number of military deaths that occurred when there was unbalanced multipolarity in Europe.

ES: Data on number of wars and total war years are from Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), pp. 90–91; and J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816–1980* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982), pp. 82–95. Data on deadliness of wars is from Singer and Small, *Resort to Arms*, pp. 82–95, save for the following exceptions: the Napoleonic Wars, from Charles J. Esdaile, *The Wars of Napoleon* (London: Longman, 1995), p. 300; Navarino Bay, from John Laffin, *Brassey's Battles: 3,500 Years of Conflict, Campaigns and Wars from A–Z* (London: Brassey's Defence, 1986), p. 299; the Russian Civil War, from Levy, *War*, p. 61; and the Neapolitan War, from Clive Emsley, *Napoleonic Europe* (New York: Longman, 1993).

conflicts (and probably about as many civilian deaths when all the murder and mayhem in World War II is taken into account).

Balanced multipolarity falls somewhere in between the other two kinds of systems. Consider that there were no hegemonic wars, five great power vs. great power wars, and nine great power vs. minor power wars during the times when Europe was multipolar but without a potential hegemon—1792-93, 1815-1902, 1919-38. In terms of frequency, war took place somewhere in Europe during 20 of the relevant 109 years. Thus, war was going on 18.3 percent of the time in balanced multipolarity, compared with 2.2 percent in bipolarity and 79.5 percent in unbalanced multipolarity. Regarding deadliness, there were approximately 1.2 million military deaths in the various wars fought in balanced multipolarity, which is far less than the 27 million in unbalanced multipolarity, but substantially more than the 10,000 in bipolarity.

## CONCLUSION

These results appear to offer strong confirmation of offensive realism. Nevertheless, an important caveat is in order. Nuclear weapons, which were first deployed in 1945, were present for the entire time that Europe was bipolar, but they were not present in any of the previous multipolar systems. This creates a problem for my argument, because nuclear weapons are a powerful force for peace, and they surely help account for the absence of great-power war in Europe between 1945 and 1990. It is impossible, however, to determine the relative influence of bipolarity and nuclear weapons in producing this long period of stability.

It would be helpful in dealing with this problem if we could turn to some empirical studies that provide reliable evidence on the effects of bipolarity and multipolarity on the likelihood of war in the absence of nuclear weapons. But there are none. From its beginning until 1945 the European state system was multipolar, leaving this history barren of comparisons that would reveal the differing effects of multipolarity and bipolarity. Earlier history does afford some apparent examples of bipolar

systems, including some that were warlike—Athens and Sparta, Rome and Carthage—but this history is inconclusive because it is incomplete.

This problem does not arise, however, when comparing the two kinds of multipolarity, because there were no nuclear weapons before 1945. It is apparent from the analysis that whether a multipolar system contains a potential hegemon like Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, or Nazi Germany has a profound influence on the prospects for peace. Any time a multipolar system contains a power that has the strongest army as well as the greatest amount of wealth, deadly war among the great powers is more likely.

Little has been said up to this point about international politics after the Cold War. The next and final chapter will consider relations among the great powers in the 1990s, as well as the likelihood of great-power conflict in the century ahead.