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Where Are the Great Powers?

At Home with the Kids

Edward N. Luttwak

During the Cold War as before it, local and regional conflicts were often instigated or at least encouraged and materially supported by rival great powers. Now, by contrast, the absence of functioning great powers is the cause of the world's inability to cope with all manner of violent disorders. The result is that not only groups of secessionists and aggressive small powers, such as Serbia, but even mere armed bands can now impose their will or simply rampage, unchecked by any greater force from without. Today there is neither the danger of great power wars nor the relative tranquility once imposed by each great power within its own sphere of influence.

By the traditional definition, great powers were states strong enough to successfully wage war without calling on allies. But that distinction is now outdated, because the issue today is not whether war can be made with or without allies, but whether war can be made at all. Historically, there have been tacit preconditions to great power status: a readiness to use force whenever it was advantageous to do so and an acceptance of the resulting combat casualties with equanimity, as long as the number was not disproportionate.

In the past, those preconditions were too blatantly obvious and too easily satisfied to deserve a mention by either practitioners or theoreticians. Great powers normally relied on intimidation rather than combat, but only because a willingness to use force was assumed. Moreover, they would use force undeterred by the prospect of the ensuing casualties, within limits of course.

NOT-SO-GREAT BEHAVIOR

The Somalia debacle, precipitated by the loss of 18 U.S. soldiers, and the Haiti fiasco, caused by the fear that a handful of U.S. troops might be killed while defeating that country's military dictatorship, sufficiently exposed the current unreality of the great power concept. In

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pride or shame, Americans might dispute any wider conclusion from those events. They would like to reserve for themselves the special sensitivity that forces policy to change completely because 18 professional soldiers are killed (soldiers, one might add, who come from a country in which gun-related deaths were last clocked at one every 14 minutes). But in fact the virtue or malady, as the case may be, is far from exclusively American.

Most recently, Britain and France (not to mention that other putative great power, Germany) flatly refused to risk their ground troops in combat to resist aggression in the former Yugoslavia. Overcoming the fear of reprisals against their own troops, it was only with great reluctance, after almost two years of horrific outrages, that the two countries finally consented to the carefully circumscribed threat of NATO air strikes issued in February 1994. To be sure, neither Britain nor France nor any other European power has any vital interests at stake in the former Yugoslavia. But that is the very essence of the matter: the great powers of history would have viewed the disintegration of Yugoslavia not as a noxious problem to be avoided but as an opportunity to be exploited. Using the need to protect populations under attack as their propaganda excuse and with the restoration of law and order as their ostensible motive, they would have intervened to establish zones of influence for themselves, just as the genuine great powers did in their time (even distant Russia disputed the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908). Thus the power vacuum would have been filled, to the disappointments of local small power ambitions, and to the great advantage of local populations and peace.

As for why nothing of the kind happened in the former Yugoslavia in the face of atrocities not seen since the Second World War, the reason is not in dispute: no European government was any more willing than the U.S. government to risk its soldiers in combat. Of Japan, literally nothing need be said on this score.

The refusal to tolerate combat casualties is not confined to democracies. The Soviet Union was still an intact totalitarian dictatorship when it engaged in the classic great power venture of Afghanistan, only to find that even its tightly regimented society would not tolerate the resulting casualties. At the time, outside observers were distinctly puzzled by the minimal Soviet theater strategy in Afghanistan. After an abortive effort to establish territorial control, the Soviet strategy defended only the largest towns and the ring road that connected them, otherwise conceding almost the entire country to guerrillas. Likewise, knowledgeable observers were astonished by the inordinately prudent tactics of Soviet ground forces. Except for a few commando units, they mostly remained confined inside their fortified garrisons; often failing to sally out even when guerrillas were known to be nearby. At the time, the explanation most commonly offered was the reluctance of Soviet commanders to rely on their poorly trained conscript troops. But there is a better explanation: the Soviet headquarters was under constant and intense pressure from Moscow to avoid casualties at all costs because of the outraged reactions of families and friends.
This example also allows us to eliminate another superficial explanation for the novel refusal to accept even modest numbers of combat casualties: the impact of television coverage. The Soviet Union never allowed its population to see any television images of war like those shown in the United States, and still the reaction of Soviet society to the casualties of the Afghan war was essentially identical to the American reaction to the Vietnam War. Although in both cases cumulative casualties over the span of many years did not reach the casualty figures of one day of battle in past wars, they were nevertheless deeply traumatic.

**THE WAR OF ALL MOTHERS**

There is a more fundamental explanation that remains valid in cases with or without democratic governance, with or without uncontrolled war reportage by television: the demographic character of modern, postindustrial societies. The populations of the great powers of history were commonly comprised of families of four, five or six children; families of one, two or three were rarer than families of seven, eight or nine. On the other hand, infant mortality rates were also high. When it was normal to lose one or more children to disease, the loss of one more youngster in war had a different meaning than it has for today's families, which have two or three children, all of whom are expected to survive, and each of whom represents a larger share of the family's emotional economy.

As any number of historical studies have shown, death itself was a much more normal part of the familial experience when it was not confined mostly to the very old. To lose a young family member for any reason was no doubt always tragic, yet a death in combat was not the extraordinary and fundamentally unacceptable event that it has now become. Parents who commonly approved of their sons' and daughters' decisions to join the armed forces, thereby choosing a career dedicated to combat and its preparation just as a fireman's career is dedicated to the fighting of fires, now often react with astonishment and anger when their children are actually sent into potential combat situations. And they are apt to view their wounding or death as an outrageous scandal, rather than as an occupational hazard.

The Italians, perhaps more postindustrial than most in this sense, with Europe's lowest birthrate, have a word for these reactions: *mammismo,* which might be translated as "motherism." These attitudes have great political resonance nowadays, powerfully constraining the use of force. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan proves that the constraint can become operative even without a mass media eager to publicize private grief, members of Congress ready to complain at the instance of relatives, or pointed questions being asked in a parliament.

Present attitudes toward combat losses that derive from the new family demography are powerful because they are not confined to the relatives and friends of servicemen on active duty. They are shared throughout society—and were shared even within the Soviet elite, it turns out—generating an extreme reluctance to impose a possible sacrifice that has become so much greater than it was when national populations were perhaps much smaller but families were much larger.
What of the Gulf War, then, or for that matter Britain’s war to reconquer the Falklands? Do they not suggest a much simpler explanation: that attitudes depend on the perceived importance of the undertaking, the objective value of what is at stake, or—more realistically—the sheer ability of political leaders to justify the necessity of combat? After all, even during World War II, soldiers greatly resented assignments to what were described as secondary fronts, quickly dubbing any theater that was less than highly publicized as “forgotten.” The less immediately compelling the justification, the more likely combat and its casualties are to be opposed. It might therefore seem that the new 2.2-children-per-family demographics and the resulting “mammism” are irrelevant, that what counts is what has always counted, namely the importance of the interests at stake, the political orchestration of the event and plain leadership.

Those contentions undoubtedly have some merit, but much less than meets the eye. In the first place, if lives can only be placed at risk in situations already dramatically prominent on the national scene, hence on a larger rather than a smaller scale, and only in final extremities, that in itself already rules out the most efficient use of force—early and on a small scale to prevent escalation.

**Constricted Visions**

In the past, there was no question of limiting the use of force to situations in which genuinely vital interests, that is, survival interests, were at stake. To struggle for mere survival was the unhappy predicament of threatened small powers, which had to fight purely to defend themselves and could not hope to achieve anything more with their modest strength. Great powers were different; they could only remain great if they were seen as willing and able to use force to acquire and protect even non-vital interests, including distant possessions or minor additions to their spheres of influence. To lose a few hundred soldiers in some minor probing operation or a few thousand in a small war or expeditionary venture were routine events for the great powers of history.

Great powers are in the business of threatening, rather than being threatened. A great power cannot be that unless it asserts all sorts of claims that far exceed the needs of its own immediate security, including the protection of allies and clients as well as other less-than-vital interests. It must therefore risk combat for purposes that may be fairly recondite, perhaps in little-known distant lands, but definitely in situations in which it is not compelled to fight but rather deliberately chooses to do so. And that is the choice now denied by the fear of casualties.

Even now, exceptional strivings by exceptionally determined leaders skilled in the art of political leadership can widen a great power’s freedom of action, overcoming at least in part the effects of the new family demographics. That was obviously the case in the Persian Gulf intervention and the Falklands reconquest; both would have been impossible undertakings had it not been for the exceptional leadership of President George Bush and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, respectively. Their leadership was the decisive factor, not the undoubted significance of keeping Iraq
Where Are the Great Powers?

I hope to achieve modest
the equally undoubted insignificance
e of the Falklands for any practical purpose
whatever (another illustration of the
irrelevance of the "objective" value of
whatever is at stake).

Leadership is important, but that con-
sideration cuts both ways, because the
routine functioning of a great power can-
not depend on the fortuitous presence of
exceptional leadership. It will be recalled,
moreover, that a very low opinion of
Argentine military strength (indeed, a
gross underestimate of Argentine air
power) and the resulting belief that casu-
salties would be very low were crucial to
Britain's commitment to war in the Falk-
lands. Likewise, the imperative of mini-
mizing casualties was the leitmotiv of the
entire Persian Gulf intervention, from
the initial deployment, which was origi-
nally presented as purely defensive, to the
sudden decision to call off the ground
war. (To be sure, there were other consid-
erations as well, notably the fear that
Iran would become the next threat if Iraq's
army were utterly destroyed.) In any case,
it seems clear that the freedom of action
gained by successful leadership was still
very narrow; it is not hard to guess what
would have happened to President Bush
and his administration if the casualties of
the Persian Gulf venture had reached the
levels of any one day of serious fighting
in either world war.

NATIONS OF FAMILIES
If the significance of the new family
demographics is accepted, it follows that
no advanced low-birth-rate countries can
play the role of a classic great power any-
more, not the United States or Russia, not
Britain, France or, least of all, Germany or
Japan. They may still possess the physical
attributes of military strength or the eco-
nomic base to develop such strength even
on a great scale, but their societies are so
allergic to casualties that they are
effectively debellicized, or nearly so.

Aside from self-defense and excep-
tional cases à la the Persian Gulf War,
only such conflict as can take place with-
out soldiers is likely to be tolerated.

Much can be done by air power, with
few lives at risk, especially if bureaucratic
resistance to the use of air power alone
can be overcome. Sea power too can be
useful at times, and robotic weapons will
be used increasingly. But Bosnia, Soma-
ilia and Haiti remind us that the typical
great power business of restoring order
still requires ground forces. In the end,
the infantry, albeit mechanized, is still
indispensable, although now mostly
withheld by the fear of casualties. It is
ture of course that high-birth-rate coun-
tries can still fight wars by choice, and
several have in recent years. But even
those very few among them that have
competent armed forces lack other key
great power attributes, including any
significant strategic reach.

In the absence of functioning great
powers, the entire character of world pol-
tics has changed. Under the old macht-
politik rules, for example, the United
States should have been eager to extend
its military influence to the Russian bor-
der by granting full NATO membership to
Poland and other former Warsaw Pact
countries. Instead the United States
opposed NATO's expansion. In the central
arena of world affairs, only the commer-
cial and industrial policies that I have
elsewhere labeled “geo-economic” still have a recognizably conflictual flavor.

Unless the world is content to cohabit with chronic disorder and widespread violence, a synthetic version of law-and-order interventionism by great powers will have to be invented. The remedies we already have are certainly inadequate. To keep the armed forces of the United States as powerful as possible—the preferred military option, of course—is ineffectual when intimidation will not do it, yet the United States refuses to fight. And U.S. ability to intimidate cannot but decline as the word spreads.

**IMPROBABLE STAND-INS**

Two rather improbable schemes are therefore left. Both satisfy the essential requirement of circumventing the intolerance of casualties. Both could be organized quite efficiently, given the will to do so. Yet both would be furiously opposed by the military establishment, and both undeniably have unpleasant moral connotations.

One scheme would be to copy the Ghurka model, recruiting troops in some suitable region abroad, if not in Nepal itself. They would be mercenaries, of course, but they would be of high quality, and a common ethnic origin would assure their basic cohesion. In practice, U.S. Ghurkas would provide the infantry units, with native U.S. forces providing the more technical forms of combat support involving smaller risks and fewer casualties.

The alternative is to copy the foreign legion model, with units that combine U.S. officers and nonnative volunteers who have renounced their national allegiance, perhaps attracted by the offer of U.S. citizenship after a given term of service. Under both schemes, political responsibility for any casualties would be much reduced, even if not eliminated. The United States, by the way, raised ethnic mercenary units in Indochina with rather good results, and it recruited individual foreign volunteers for Europe-based special forces. So neither scheme is as outlandish or unprecedented as it may seem. Still, one would not want to bet that they would be seriously considered, let alone adopted.

If no remedy can be found for the passing of the great powers and the conspicuous inability of the United States itself to play that role, both the United States and the world had better become habituated to the consequences. Violent disorders unchecked by effective great power interventions have both immediate and delayed effects, including disrupted export markets, refugees and new sources of international crime and terrorism. But Americans will also have to learn not to see, hear or feel much that would otherwise offend their moral sensitivities. Richer inhabitants of the poorest countries learn from childhood how to step politely over the quadriple-amputee beggar in their path without ever actually looking at him, and how not to see the starving mother and child, the waif and the abandoned elderly who try to beg from them as they walk into a restaurant or bank. Blindness can be learned, and Americans will have to learn how to passively ignore avoidable tragedies and horrific atrocities. The experience of Bosnia-Herzegovina shows that Americans have already made much progress in that direction.