15. International and transnational interactions
Geography and war

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The general theory of hegemonic succession wars in world-system theory is similar to that of power transition wars in political science/IR. Given uneven global economic development, some states become more dominant than others and they not only rise but decline as well, and importantly, their decline is tied to the rise of others. Eventually a point is reached where rising competitors are so strong, and a declining hegemon so weak, that international order can no longer encase the aspirations of rising, or the defensiveness of falling, and great power war breaks out.

Within the life span of the Wallerstein (1974) world-system, Spain was the first hegemon and with its decline, competition among rising powers emerged over who would follow. It was eventually the British, but to get there they had key wars with Dutch aspirants in the mid-seventeenth century and the French in the Seven Years War (1756–63) and Napoleonic Wars (1803–15). At that point, with rivals vanquished, Britain went on to world-system hegemony in the nineteenth century. By 1914, though, Britain was in decline and a new set of aspirants, led by Germany and the United States, were on the rise. All of them—declining and rising powers—were caught up in another hegemonic succession struggle comprising World War One and Two (1914–45). Victorious, the United States went on to dominate the second half of the twentieth century. But by the early twenty-first century the United States seems to be clearly in decline while new powers like China and India seem on the rise. Whether a world war over succession to American hegemony comes to pass remains to be seen, but it has long been speculated that the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance of our time will be Washington, Tokyo, and Beijing on one side, and Moscow, Berlin, and Paris on the other, with London/Delhi and perhaps others on the bubble.

But so-called hegemonic transition wars can also be approached through the lens of geography and geopolitics, perspectives that have been out of favor for over a century but which seem increasingly relevant to the twenty-first century polycentric international system. For example, if you re-examine successful world-system hegemons and failed aspirants, you will note that the hegemons have been predominantly sea powers (like Spain, Britain, the United States) while defeated aspirants were predominantly land powers (France and Germany). That hegemons are predominantly sea powers, and the rising, but ultimately failing, aspirants land powers, is an interesting mix of geopolitical and world-systemic dynamics and suggests a rethinking of what is the base and superstructure of the world-system. The base has always been the world-economy, but when oceans and continents co-vary with cycles of hegemony and great power wars, then perhaps the true base of the world-system lies with the deeper geographical substrate, making the world-economy a globological superstructure. This association of hegemony/aspirant powers with water/land could, of course, be spurious, so let’s examine this association from a longer historical perspective.
Here we note that the earliest empires were tied to rivers: Pharonic Egypt on the Nile; Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates; and early Chinese dynasties between the Yellow and Yangtze. Then, in the Western story of power, with a shift toward larger bodies of water, hegemonic centers of power went from the eastern Mediterranean (Athenian Empire) to the western Mediterranean (Carthaginian Empire) to the whole Mediterranean (Roman Empire) and then to the oceanic-based sea power of the Atlantic and partial Pacific (Spanish Empire), to the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans (British Empire), to all oceans (American Empire). There were, of course, ancient and modern empires that were land based, and some mixed land/sea power, but in general, hegemonic sea power and hegemonic economic power seem to co-vary. There is also, of course, the rise of air and space power, and they will have to be included in future discussions. Note, though, that into the twenty-first century 90 percent of world trade is done by shipping.

If there is a possible causal relation here it probably lies with the fact that water is something of an economic multiplier. From cutting transportation and transaction costs in the import of raw materials and export of finished goods, to providing access to wider markets, and synergies generated by port cities that fruitfully mix cultures, technologies, religions, and virtually anything else that might go into innovation in economic practices, river, sea, and ocean based, or accessed, economies possess a comparative advantage over the solely land based.

There are obvious land-based trade routes (famously the Silk Road), but nonetheless it seems that sea-based economies are more defined by their emphasis upon exchange relations (overseas trade), and land economies by their emphasis upon relations in domestic production (class relations). Behind this observation lie more abstract debates about the relative priority of exchange vs. production, or Smith vs. Marx, which we can approach from a geographical perspective. In general, land constrained consciousness produces thinkers like Karl Marx, who emphasize the role of territorially bounded economic relations, that is, production, or class relations. These sum up to territorially rooted economic wholes, like “modes of production,” with exploitative divisions amongst the domestic populace constituting the origin of wealth.

Alternatively, sea constrained consciousness produces theorists like Adam Smith, who place more emphasis upon trade and exchange relations. Here the wealth of nations arises from the acquisition of factors of production and the dispersal of product, for example, exchange relations between different land areas separated by water, that is, overseas trade. Wealth for land theorists, conversely, arises from the more immediate relations of the territorially bound population in a trapped finite political universe. Hence the advance of one sub-division of the territorial whole has to, by definition, come from the wealth of the other sub-division, making the land theorists perspective on social life that of perpetual class warfare. Marx’s argument that, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” is nothing but land theoretically expressing itself as a theory of economic relations. But for sea consciousness expressing itself in theory, wealth arises out of water’s presence to bring factors of production in, and transport product out, and so it is out of this indirect relation with people afar (overseas trade/exchange) that produces the wealth of nations.

Water access accelerates economic growth, but growth also occurs with land-based economies, which provides the foundation for their political expansion. The key point here is that economic growth has different political manifestations for sea versus land powers. This is because, given a natural boundary comprising water, like oceans, the transformation of economic power into expansive political power (empire) is constrained where the land meets the sea. In order to politically expand and to move armies into other polities’ territories, armies must be placed upon boats and then shipped to their destination.

Land powers, conversely, also grow economically and that growth can be translated into political expansion. However, there is no need to have armies board ships, for they can be directly marched into their neighbor’s territory. During the Napoleonic Wars, France invaded German
and Russian territory; and then they invaded back. Germany under Hitler invaded France and Russia; and the Russians pushed back and invaded Germany. All of this was possible because these states existed geographically next to each other on the great north European plain. This suggests that for land powers, economic expansion can be more easily translated into direct political expansion at the expense of territorial neighbors, whereas direct territorial expansion is more difficult for sea powers. Nineteenth-century German industrial expansion fueled the growth of the German Empire, which grew through the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and the Austro-Prussian War (1866). Although Britain was economically expanding at the same time, there was no invasion of the continent to create a German-like British Empire. There was a British Empire, of course, but it was an overseas empire, as was the empire of Imperial Spain and ancient Athens.

Given the limitation of having to ship armies, sea powers have been primarily expeditionary forces, which are, of necessity, smaller than land-based armies and thereby limited in what opposition they can hope to successfully engage. In effect, given the water-induced constraint of dependency upon expeditionary forces, military engagements shift to what can actually be conquered, and that has involved shifts to the developing world and the acquisition of colonial holdings.

Put more boldly: sea powers, if they develop, which given the economic multiplier of water they inevitably will, have to become colonial powers, and to develop overseas empires. Athens did not conquer and enslave territorial neighbors as did Sparta. But with triremes working hand in hand with trade and exchange power, Athens conquered weaker Aegean island city-states and built a maritime empire. No doubt a Spartan leader said something similar to the Kaiser, who observed that if England were to try to invade Europe, he would send out a local constable and have their army arrested. Athenians, by and large, avoided direct engagements with the Spartan phalanx. Again, the dynamic here is general. Imperial Spain held the Spanish Netherlands and dominated the Holy Roman Empire, but did not expand territorial Spain beyond the Pyrenees. New Spain, though, is in the Americas as an overseas colonial holding facilitated by Spanish galleon sea power. Similarly, hegemonic Britain did not expand by enlarging to include territory in Europe, but rather expanded overseas, and again it was based on a sea power combination of trade and the Royal Navy. Finally, after the continental expansion of the United States (which again, was an act of land power), the power projection of the United States was not based on the incorporation of Canada and Mexico into an even larger United States of North America, but instead took the initial form of overseas colonies and then under full hegemony of bases and periodic interventions. It was, as with Spain and Britain, another naval projection of power over the oceanic commons.

All of this suggests that the land-bound and sea-accessed undergoing economic expansion generate two different patterns of empire. For land-based economies, transforming economic expansion into political expansion results in what could be called empire at neighbors’ expense—a greater Sparta, a German Empire, a Third Reich, a Napoleonic Empire, and a Czarist Russia. For expanding sea-based economies, the result is overseas maritime empires—the fifth-century BCE trireme backed Athenian imperium, the sixteenth-century Spanish galleon backed colonial holdings in the Americas, the nineteenth-century Royal Navy backed British Empire in India, Africa, and elsewhere, and twentieth/twenty-first century aircraft carrier backed American imperial influence everywhere there was water.

There is an interesting irony here. It is the weakness of an army’s mobility provided by ocean boundaries that forces sea powers to primarily engage weaker opponents, hence to only engage the developing world, hence to only develop colonial empires. If it were not for the national boundary of water, armies could be marched right into neighbor’s territories; expansion could be national expansion rather than remaining within the limits of colonial expansion. On the other hand, it is the very ease of marching across one’s border to another’s heartland, coupled with the absence of significant water access that limits the colonial holdings of land powers.
As these different forms of empire grew, the multiplicative effect of water upon economic growth allowed sea powers to pull ahead of their developing land equivalents. The classic case was Athenian growth after partnering with Sparta to defeat the Persians in 480 BCE, which in turn led to Thucydides famous explanation for the ultimate origin of the Peloponnesian War, “What made the war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused Sparta.” But more than this needs to be said to fully understand the underlying dynamic of why it is that sea powers repeatedly end up being world-system hegemons but not land powers. After all, if economic hegemony is based upon productive advantage, why can’t that be attained by a land power? Neither Marx nor Wallerstein show any preference to sea access as part of their theories of economic development. Part of the answer, I think, lies in the aforementioned role of water for productive advantage, accompanied by the other part which centers on the kinds of political empires water or land engender: the territorially proximate expansion for the landed and the overseas expansion for the sea-accessed.

Over time through their overseas markets, imported raw materials, lower transport costs, and so forth, the water multiplier pulls the sea-accessed ahead of the land-bound. Then, geopolitically, the continued growth of the overseas empire leads to a surrounding of the heartland of the land powers and their empires. As an indicator of the differential in power, note the one-sided nature of complaints. Land powers resent the colonial holdings of sea powers. Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798 in good part to try to circumvent British ties to India. The Kaiser wanted to build a Berlin-Baghdad railway for the same purpose, and the Great Game between Russia and Britain was about access to and control of India. In contrast, sea powers wait and watch land powers grow their local empires, and only engage in balancing alliances as a means to counter their growing land power (Levy and Thompson 2010; Thompson and Rasler 1994). Interestingly, there seem to be fewer complaints regarding the absence of a land empire by sea powers.

Complaining and rivalries are one thing, but why do these two geographically rooted systems engage in war. First, let’s consider the simple Thucydidian account. The sea-accessed grow faster and at some point the land-bounded realize they will never catch up. Why though, that prompts preemptive war on the land power’s part is unclear, for the sea-accessed economies power is no threat to the land armies of the land-bound powers. Sparta must have known that no Athenian phalanx could ever defeat them in battle; no land invasion of the Peloponnesian by Atticans would ever be successful. And while there is much talk about how Athens hid behind her walls and waited out the Spartan invasion, it seems just as reasonable that the Spartans could have waited out the Athenians who could never have defeated them on land. Why go to war?

Perhaps it is more complicated, as, in fact, neither land nor sea powers can defeat the other on their own terrain. It was Spartan warships purchased with Persian money that finally defeated the Athenians at the end of the Peloponnesian War; it was, then, sea power that defeated sea power rather than the Spartan phalanx, although both could have waited it out. What forces the issue? A second hypothesis would be a variant of Thucydides: the land power as spoiler thesis. From this point of view, the idea of hegemonic transition wars is an inaccurate characterization of what actually goes on, for there is, in fact, no intense competition among competitive national economies over who will be the next global economic hegemon. Land powers are doomed because of their landed status and instead, they play the role of spoilers, and at the point at which the past sea power is about to give way to the up and coming sea power, they make their move. France was never going to succeed Spain economically, so Napoleon moved militarily to try to take over the system. Germany was never going to succeed Britain economically, so the Kaiser and then Hitler moved militarily. In effect, land powers challenge the old...
hegemon precisely because they cannot replace her, and their actions unwittingly facilitate the rise of a new sea power.

The classic problem, though, still remains: why did Sparta choose to attack? What was the real basis of their fear of the growth of Athenian power, for there was no real existential Athenian threat to Spartan national existence. And if the Kaiser felt that his local police could arrest the British army once it had landed on the continent, there was not much Spartan fear of the Athenian phalanx either.

If the first two accounts do not seem totally satisfactory, let us consider a third: empire spillover. Sea powers continue to add colonies, control trade routes, and dominate the global water commons. In some sense this is no existential threat to land powers. They can continue to expand on the land into adjacent territories. If land and sea powers do not directly threaten each other, there are no grounds for conflict. But land expansion can reach a point where it can threaten sea acquisitions. It was by sea that Britain dominated India but Russian land expansion was trying to approach a British sea holding. Earlier, Napoleonic France had tried to limit Britain in India through land operations in Egypt and thereby access to the Red Sea. Britain responded by engaging Russia in the Great Game of central Asia, and earlier the Royal Navy destroyed Napoleon’s fleet at the Battle of the Nile (1798), stranding him in Egypt, and Britain was unhappy about the landed’s effort of the Berlin to Baghdad railroad project. The point here is that eventually, land-generated and sea-generated expansions come into contact, generating competition, rivalry and then conflict.

This leads to the following idea: turn Thucydides on his head. That is, it is the hegemon who is fearful of the power of the aspirant; it is Athens who is fearful of Sparta. As with the other models, we begin with both land and sea powers economically expanding and with the water multiplier assumption, we assume the sea power pulls ahead. This is the growth of Athenian power between the defeat of the Persians in 480 and the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431. However, while one is pulling ahead, it is also the case that both are growing, hence developing contiguous land and overseas empires. Therefore, along with the nineteenth-century expansion of the British overseas Empire, there was a similar expansion of the Bismarkian/Wilhelminian German Empire within the land confines of continental Europe.

As noted earlier, colonial expansion requires less military force projection than land wars against other land powers, and therefore in some sense, while the expanse of the sea power’s maritime holdings are greater than those of the land power, they are, of necessity, also more weakly held, which makes them, in time, feasible objects to consider acquiring by land power. While this was done in order to obtain access to British India, there are no equivalent machinations by Britain to directly pry territory from the expanding German Empire or Siberian territory from the eastern expansion of the Russian Empire. On the contrary, Britain had tried to accommodate the rise of Germany by giving the Germans colonies in Africa at the Berlin Conference on Africa in 1884.

Geographically, the British Empire was something of a peripheral ring of holdings surrounding the core of the expanding land empires of Russia and Germany. Their growth is clearly the prompt for the famous H.J. Mackinder (1904) idea of the Eurasian heartland as the pivot of history. If we take the Eurasian core as the equivalent of something like the Spartan heartland, then Mackinder is Thucydides sea power fear of Spartan land power. The strategic key for fifth-century Sparta and early twentieth-century Germany was not their colonial holdings, but their land holdings, the German and Spartan Empires themselves. For the British and the Athenians, their strategic key was the ring of imperial/colonial overseas holdings, ports of call and key waterway passages that they controlled. But this British sea power posed no threat to German land power.
There was German resentment over British colonies, but no existential threat. It was the Germans who wanted a rail road to Baghdad, not the British a railway to Berlin, and it was Russians playing the Great Game for influence in central Asia, not the British for influence in Siberia. It was, in reality then, the German/Russian landed core of a geopolitical world-system that was inching toward the weakly held outer rim of British sea powered holdings. It is this sea power anxiety that lies behind Mackinder’s famous essay. Therefore, it is the growing fear for the vital interests of the British, rather than the Germans or Russians, as it was for the Athenians rather than the Spartans, that lies behind so-called hegemonic wars, whether in the fifth or twenty-first centuries.

As a working hypothesis, then, sea power generates weak yet wide imperial holdings: the global island ring of colonies. Land power generates the narrower and stronger inner core of land-based empires. The resultant outcome of international politics, empires, great power rivalries, and wars is geographically based. To repeat: land powers can, and do, march directly into their neighbors backyard, and because these are territorially contiguous areas, they can more easily be incorporated into the homeland polity—the growing Czarist, Bismarkian, and Spartan empires. Sea powers cannot do this as easily. Expeditionary forces are required, which are lighter, hence that which can be defeated must be weaker, hence, in general, this tends to be the outer rim of what has been called the developing or colonial world. Britain’s overseas empire grew and grew, but with that geo-width came a much more tenuous hold than the landed’s domestic empire expansion at the expense of immediate neighboring states. Paul Kennedy’s (1989) imperial overstretch is, therefore, a geographic destiny for growing sea powers. Their home base cannot grow because of the water-induced limits on force projection possible vis-à-vis neighbors, whereas the successful land power grows and grows domestically. Napoleonic, Bismarkian, and Czarist Empires are all on the European continent, whereas the maps of the growth of Imperial Athens, Spain, and Britain are all outside of these respective homelands. Such are the constraints and opportunities geography imposes upon human agency and strategy in carrying out domestic and international politics.

This brings us to the geographic foundations of war. The weak ring of sea power holdings is eventually threatened by the growing expansion of the inner core of landed empires. Thucydides is turned on his head. The outer ring, weakly held as it is, is relatively safe from the predations of the land powers until their own geographic destiny pushes them into ever-greater strength and they begin, land-wise, to attempt links to the weaker ring of sea power holdings. At that point the Thucydidian fear is the sea power. And so the preemptive war logic of Thucydides is activated: but now it is the powerful that act out of fear. It was not the fear of the growing power of Athens, or Britain, or Imperial Spain that prodded the land powers to engage in war, but the fear of the expanding Spartan, Napoleonic, and Wilhelmine/Third Reichian Germany that eventually threatened the holdings of the extant hegemonic sea power. Prussia becomes the German Empire; Russia plus Siberia becomes the Russian Empire; Sparta plus conquered neighbors becomes a greater Sparta. The ring of sea power holdings, though, can only yield resentment, not direct threats to national existence. The expanding land power can, if it continues to grow, expand, conquer, make war, and threaten the sea power’s more fragile hold on colonies. A sea-homeland is no match for the expanded domestic empire of the land-homeland, and so the Thucydidian logic of preemption emerges. However, the anxious ones are the sea powers, not the land powers.

Hegemonic succession wars, then, are only a succession of one sea power to the next. In the modern world-system it has been Spain to Britain to the United States, and given the growing Chinese navy, perhaps from the United States to China.
References