

The Terms of Power

By Tom Barry

Balance of Power: This concept of international relations originated in Europe in the mid-1600s and asserts that hegemonic ambitions of nation-states will lead inevitably to war in the absence of power balancing, whereby weaker powers either strive to increase their own military power or to counter the superior military capacity of neighboring nations. Along with containment and deterrence, balance-of-power geopolitics has been a core component of realist foreign policy decisionmaking. A related strategy, sometimes used by hegemonic powers for managing international security, is “off-shore balancing,” which calls for increased participation of lesser powers in addressing international and regional crises.

Benign Hegemony: Unlike coercive forms of hegemony, such as Japan’s prewar regional Coprosperity Sphere in East Asia, benign hegemony (also referred to as “benevolent hegemony”) ensures respect for leadership by encouraging a widespread sharing of economic benefits and frequent consultations with lesser powers. The actions of the hegemon, empire, or imperial power are commonly justified by the argument that they are motivated by benign or benevolent objectives. After the Second World War, the U.S. won respect as a benign hegemon because of its geopolitical strategy of liberal internationalism, its security umbrella in Europe and Asia benefiting former enemies, and its relatively transparent and democratic process of governance at home.

Collective Security: In response to the dismal failures of balance-of-power systems leading to the two world wars, the allied nations (led by the U.S. and Great Britain) launched two institutions—first the League of Nations following WWI and later the United Nations following WWII—that were founded on the principles that an attack on one nation was a concern to

all nations and that the threat of collective response would prevent such aggression.

Common Security: This emerging concept of international relations advanced by NGOs and progressive scholars holds that “balance-of-power,” “collective security,” and hegemonic power fall short of building enduring peaceful international relations. The concept stresses that nations and civil society organizations, building on multilateral structures, need to begin defining common interests that will ensure not only national security but also “human security.”

Conservative Internationalism: Adherents of this grand strategy of U.S. global engagement trace its origins to the interventionism of Presidents William McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt and more recently to the interventionism and rollback strategy of the Reagan administration. Like liberal internationalism, the conservative variety rejects realist and isolationist approaches to foreign policy, which focus narrowly on U.S. economic interests and direct threats to U.S. national security, and posits instead that U.S. interests and security should be broadly interpreted to include the spread of economic and political liberalism. The differences between these two types of internationalism, however, are greater than their similarities. Conservative internationalism explicitly holds that the U.S. military should be the main enforcer of international order and norms and the main instrument to ensure that those nations that fall outside U.S. favor undergo regime changes. It asserts that in its role as hegemon, the U.S. is exempt (U.S. exceptionalism) from the constraints of international norms, rule of law, and multilateralism. Conservative internationalism stands firmly behind the nation-state as the main actor in global affairs and rejects notions that globalization and multidimensional international

engagement are creating new foundations for multilateral governance. Neoconservatives are the main exponents of conservative internationalism.

Empire: The territory controlled, directly or indirectly, by an imperial nation, which retains control of colonies and subjects by dictate and exercise of military power.

Exceptionalism: An enduring belief in U.S. moral superiority that gives America special rights to unilateralism and frees it from the rules and norms that bind other nations to the international community. This conviction in U.S. virtue and in America's messianic mission in global affairs has been reinforced through the centuries by its mounting economic, military, and cultural power.

Global Governance: The collection of multilateral institutions, international agreements, rules, norms, and standards, country groupings (like the G8), and other formal and informal processes that serve to regulate governmental and private behavior across national boundaries in matters ranging from international air transportation and postal service to security issues, environmental degradation, and trade.

Hegemony: The structure of power relations in which one nation (a hegemon) assumes leadership and responsibility over world or regional systems primarily by virtue of its superior financial, commercial, and productive power and secondarily by its military power.

Imperialism: A system by which the dominant power, through military conquest, colonization, or direct control of investment and trade, expropriates the land, natural resources, and labor of another people for its own enrichment.

Imperium: An informal empire, allowing some degree of autonomy to member states but requiring strong leadership backed by global policing and military power.

Isolationism: Strictly defined, U.S. isolationism refers to the political consensus of the founding fathers that the U.S. should define its foreign policy and interventionism apart from the balance-of-power dynamics of Europe. It was this isolationism that shaped populist America First sentiment against U.S. involvement in World War II and the League of Nations. Today, elements of this traditional isolationism remain and have come to the fore in the anti-European sentiment within the circle of neoconservative strategists shaping Bush's foreign policy. However, isolationism is commonly used to refer to inward-looking and antiglobalist sentiments against U.S. involvement in international crises (humanitarian, economic, and military) that do not directly affect U.S. national interests.

Liberal Internationalism: A policy framework most closely identified with President Woodrow Wilson that encourages U.S. international engagement, including military interventions, to bring U.S. values and political systems—freedom, democracy, free market economies—to the rest of the world. Driven by liberal values—both economic and political—U.S. liberal internationalism has often provided the moral argument for what in fact were policies of neoimperialism that directly served U.S. economic interests. As shaped by Presidents Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, America's liberal internationalism has been closely tied to its support of a multilateral framework as the best way of ensuring international peace and development. As such, America's liberal international-

ist impulses contributed to widespread sentiment, both at home and abroad, that the U.S. was a benign hegemon.

Machtpolitik: Political relations defined by the decisive use of superior military power.

Multilateralism: A structure to manage international and regional affairs that constrains unilateral behavior through institutional mechanisms (treaties, international law, and a voting process) that ensure consultation and agreement. In the wake of World War II, there was broad consensus that national interests would be best served by multilateral systems that fostered consensus.

Multipolar, Bipolar, Unipolar: Since the beginning of the 20th century, the international system has evolved from a multipolar arrangement (including five great European powers, Japan, and the U.S.) to a bipolar standoff during the cold war to a unipolar world since the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

New Realism: With respect to U.S. foreign policy, new realism refers to the Bush administration's rejection of the liberal impulses of the Clinton administration—its inclination toward humanitarian interventionism, multilateralism, social clauses in trade agreements, etc.—and to the current unapologetic acceptance of U.S. supremacy. Great power relations, under this new realist framework, are to be managed not by traditional balance-of-power arrangements but rather as part of a grand strategy of maintaining and enhancing U.S. supremacy, particularly military superiority.

Realism: This approach to foreign policy decisionmaking focuses strictly on national interests and security, rejecting idealism and values-driven

policies. It stresses the centrality of the nation-state and improving the position and power of the U.S. relative to other nations. It is closely associated with a worldview or philosophy of international relations known as *realpolitik*, which stresses that nations act in pursuit of their own interests and in accordance to their degree of power. Realists reject isolationism and internationalism in both their liberal and conservative manifestations.

Realpolitik: A hard-headed, cold-soul approach to international affairs by which foreign policy decisions respond directly and immediately to what furthers U.S. national interests and security. *Realpolitik* rejects the idealist, value-laden foreign policy of

“liberal internationalism” as well as the supremacist assumptions of conservative internationalism, focusing instead on managing power relations and manipulating them through diplomacy deterrence—and force when necessary—to protect U.S. economic interests and national security.

Supremacism: This policy framework embraces the U.S. superpower status in a unipolar world. For its adherents, it is a policy firmly based in “new realist” assessment of power balances—namely, that as the predominant power whose military might is beyond challenge, the U.S. cannot and should not be bound by multilateral constraints. American power should be used to ensure that the U.S. maintains its dominance both in

order to protect its national interests and because it is this very dominance that now underpins what the supremacists call “the American peace.”

Unilateralism: A pattern of international engagement in which one nation acts outside the framework of bilateral (between two countries) or multilateral (involving many countries) agreements and negotiation.

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