

Who Wants to Be A Great Power?

By Lawrence Freedman

Strategic competition is back in vogue. After years of worrying about ethnic conflict and humanitarian intervention, civil wars and counterinsurgency, there is a renewed focus among policymakers, think-tankers, and academics on traditional strategic concerns and in particular great power confrontation.¹ For many students of international relations this appears as no more than recognizing a feature of the system that never went away. As the United Nations has never turned into a world government, states still have to take responsibility for their own security, and that means that at times they are bound to clash.² In principle, those states with the greatest power should be the most secure, able to make threats and offer inducements to persuade lesser powers to get in line. For this reason, countries of any size and natural endowment might be expected to aspire to great power status. Who does not want to be rich and powerful? But it is a status that can be a mixed blessing. It suggests great ambitions and interests that go well beyond defending borders and maintaining order at home, to seeking to establish and sustain congenial governments elsewhere, and even coming to their assistance when necessary. Once interests are defined expansively, conflicts are apt to develop with other great powers with their own expansive interests. With every conflict the status is at risk for if even the most marginal of interests is not defended, this can be presented at home and abroad as a sign of weakness, reluctance to honor commitments, and ultimately declining power.

Great Power and the Realists

In the past, the most formidable great powers could be recognized by their continental or maritime empires. Empires are no longer possible. We now accept that acquiring colonies through conquest and holding on to them through suppression of popular desires for independence is not only illegitimate but also involves too much hazard. Instead of policing empires, therefore, great powers must now sustain networks of supporting states. These networks have a transactional quality, as they depend on shared interests, though they are more likely to be durable if they are reinforced with shared values and culture. In this essay I ask whether we should assume that the networks which turn an ordinary power into a great power are also worth the costs and risks. Why would any power able to look after itself want to acquire additional layers of greatness when this means taking

Sir Lawrence Freedman is Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King's College London. This article is based on the author's Keynote Address, Lviv Security Conference, presented on 30 October 2019.

on obligations for the security of weaker powers? To make the effort worthwhile, there must be some correspondence between the interests of the great power and the wider international system. Once this comes to be doubted then the demands of a great power role can seem increasingly questionable. Others may be waiting to take over the role, but they will face the same question: Why bother?

We know the capabilities that qualify a country to be considered a great power; substantial military strength that can be used over distances; interests that go beyond their immediate locale important enough to be defended, if necessary by force; and an economy of sufficient size to generate such interests and sustain the appropriate levels of force. Being a great power means that others must pay attention to your interests and can expect sanction if they fail to do so. It means never having to say you are sorry. In this respect, the more power the better. In “old realist theory,” acquiring forms of strength became an end and not a means, leading to suggestions that power acquisition could never stop until world domination because every other contending source of power is seen as a threat. This means institutionalizing a degree of paranoia. Great powers never want to lose their competitive edge.

Those great powers at the top of an international system arranged to their satisfaction worry about being knocked off their perch. When in this position, they become conservatives, favoring a status quo which benefits them. They are soon on the lookout for radical revisionists who wish to displace them. But whatever their anxieties, they must also be wary about taking on other great powers, for that may mean war with a country of equivalent or near equivalent military strength. Thus, the starting point for much contemporary strategic discourse is that the United States, as the greatest power of all, now faces a severe challenge from Russia and China. The discussion then moves on to consider how these challenges can best be met.

There are only a few great powers but many small powers, more now than ever before. One of the distinguishing features of great powers is how they relate to small powers. They can be bullies, and often are, and for that reason smaller powers under threat from one great power will try to ally with other great powers. This requires convincing the potential great power ally that the small power security is a vital interest to the great power. The causes of war often tend to be bound up with security guarantees made by great powers to small powers. One persistent issue is whether an association with an otherwise weak power can bring benefits or is more likely to turn into an unwelcome obligation, especially once the prestige of the strong becomes attached to the fate of the weak. As a great power puts together its network of congenial states these assets in the competitive game can turn into liabilities.

So far, so realist. Others have worried about questions of international law and organizations, focused on climate change and the environment, or looked to economic change rather than shifting military balances as the drivers of history. Through all this, realist theorists of international relations continue to be preoccupied with the military strength and the vital interests of great powers. With great power competition heating up over the past decade after a relative lull, realists feel that their time has come again, pointing to the anarchic character of the international system to explain great power behavior. Where they are now less dogmatic is in the past assumption that domestic politics barely matters. It was an article of faith that the incentives that shaped the actions of one great power would have the same effect on another great power, even those with a completely different political character. What mattered was the drive to security. This faith still lies behind much international relations research which seems to assume that time and space are largely irrelevant, that great powers share the same character traits in different centuries and on different continents.

Great Power in the 21st Century

Yet it is evident that being a great power in 2020 is quite different from being one in 1920 let alone 1820. Even within realist terms so much is different in terms of the variety of candidate great powers and their geographic spread. In the age of Trump, Xi, and Putin, it is hard to take seriously the idea that domestic affairs have only a trivial effect on the logic of great power practice. Moreover, domestic affairs not only help explain strategic choices, in terms of identifying interests and making provisions for warfare, but also what the powers have on offer. The way they govern themselves and arrange their social and economic affairs is part of the influence they exert. This is not the same as soft power, which is a more limited concept. It is about a broader, ideological appeal. More importantly, the prevailing ideology of a country helps set its interests and readiness to exert other forms of power, including the use of armed force. It shapes a country's views of what constitutes a satisfactory international system. This is the point where the realists need to take in the political economists because those who benefit from free trade will have quite a different view from those more inclined to protectionist, autarchic policies. Or look to students of culture and values because those who prize individual freedoms and openness will have a different view from those nervous about admitting deep challenges to the ideological precepts that legitimize their power.

One reason that these more systemic concerns have become more important is because of the limits on the traditional ways of achieving greatness through territorial expansion. The world has now been divided up into independent states and there are few opportunities when it comes to acquiring new lands. When this is done, as with Crimea, it is considered shocking. Areas of contested territory, for example Kashmir, Palestine, and the South China Sea, remain potential flashpoints for war. This is why access to the Arctic is now seen to be a big deal strategically. Generally, however, influence over another's

affairs has to be achieved by means other than occupation. This is not only a question of legality and the Charter of the United Nations but also the difficulty of occupying another's territory—especially if the local population is hostile and prepared to resist. We know of the possibilities of guerrilla warfare and of terrorism, but regimes can also struggle to counter forms of non-violent resistance. Of course, mass movements can peter out through lack of progress and sheer exhaustion. With enough brutality, resistant populations can be subdued. Authoritarian regimes turn naturally to repression when they are otherwise unable to cope with a disaffected section of the population. But it takes time to establish an effective apparatus of repression. This is not an easy option for a new occupying force, especially one that lacks overwhelming numbers.

At the other end of the scale, it is also possible now to obliterate individual cities or even whole countries using nuclear weapons. By and large this is viewed as the ultimate deterrent to aggression, whether conventional or nuclear, and that is the standard rationale for maintaining a nuclear arsenal. Such an arsenal is not normally suggested as a means of dealing with a disaffected population. As no nuclear weapons have been used since 1945, there is now a presumption that this norm, taboo, or habit of non-use has been internalized and is unlikely to be violated. Hopefully this is not too optimistic. The first country to resort to nuclear use will be stigmatized and denounced. If they nonetheless gain a serious and durable strategic advantage then others might also come to view their arsenals as more valuable and wide-ranging in their application than previously supposed. On the other hand, if the result is generally catastrophic then previous attitudes will be confirmed and moves towards nuclear abolition might be given a boost. Until such time, the main role of the weapons is to remind the nuclear powers why a major war is a bad idea and to help keep conflict below a certain level. The fear of escalation—a

function not only of nuclear weapons but also the dangers and uncertainties associated with conventional war—explains why the great powers work hard to prevent their forces clashing at any level, and therefore why so much conflict is conducted through means short of war, such as economic sanctions, information campaigns, or cyber-war. The reluctance to escalate gives these conflicts their indecisive and indefinite quality.

The United States is in a unique position. This is in two related respects that set it apart from both Russia and China, its most serious great power competitors. The first is that it has a vast network of allies and partners across the globe. Many countries depend on it for their security. No allies can be absolutely sure that the United States would assist if they were the victims of aggression, but it has suited many to assume this because otherwise they would face enormous costs in trying to make alternative arrangements which are unlikely to be as credible or reliable. In some cases, they might need to start to think about their own nuclear programs or even finding new allies. This network has been the most remarkable feature of the international system for seven decades. Short of some internal revolution (for example as with Iran in 1979), few have been inclined to defect from this network and some that tried (for example, France) came back in. It expanded rather than shrank with the end of the Cold War. Those on the outside generally had to cope with their conflicts alone; those on the edge sometimes drew the United States into costly wars to defend its position as a good ally. Much contemporary strategic analysis around military capabilities and other coercive instruments revolves around how to sustain the U.S. role within this network. Without it, the United States would still have its own territory to defend, but with Mexico to its south and Canada to its north, the demands would be far less. The network defines the United States as a great power and it is why it wants its power to be great.

What good is this network to the United States? This brings us to the second key feature of the American position. The United States has been, for want of a better term, a liberal hegemon. That is, the main international institutions reflect values of open trade, rule of law, and human rights. The United States has worked hard to sustain them. It is of course the case that the United States has not always upheld its own values, and that many of those who wish to participate in these institutions do not really believe in them. But they still have had to make a show. Moreover, alternative ideologies to liberal capitalism have not prospered. The collapse of European communism was not the result of soft power but a sharp ideological confrontation that the Soviet system lost. Simply put, the West offered a more attractive way of life and this added to disaffection in the Soviet satellite states. The demands for freedom in 1989 were a demand to join in rights that were taken for granted in the West. Just after the end of the Cold War, America's "unipolar moment" was proclaimed. No other state could match the scale of its power or the forms of its influence. It accounted for half of the world's military capabilities—with its allies, that figure went up to 80 percent. The arrangements for managing international commerce, finance, and security were decided and maintained by the United States and its allies and underpinned by their values.

A Doubting Great Power

Thirty years later, that moment has clearly passed. The United States is still the most powerful country in the world, but its polar position is under challenge from a number of contenders. More seriously, we now see the importance of the domestic factor. Its current president does not wish to preside over a liberal hegemon. He is not particularly attached to the underpinning values, nor does he admire the established international institutions. Instead, he sees them disadvantaging the United States, requiring

a transfer of resources and favors to partners and allies that take without giving. In the security realm, this extends to complaints about America's disproportionate contribution to collective defense. This has led to severe questioning both inside and outside the United States of America's global role. It is important to stress that this did not start with President Trump. He has, however, acted in abrupt and disruptive ways that have forced America's allies to question whether this is a country upon which they dare rely in the future.

The consequences of this for international politics have been most apparent in the Middle East. This has always been a difficult part of the world in which to operate because of the severe and cross-cutting local divisions—whether over religion, access to oil, type of government, and so on. It should also be noted that while the United States has a number of close strategic partnerships in the region—for example with Saudi Arabia and

Israel—it has no formal alliances. There has always been a tension between its professed value system and maintaining these partnerships, most sharply in recent times with Saudi Arabia. The region has never been known for its stability, but the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 left it deeply unsettled and the equivocal response to the Arab Spring of 2011 unsettled it further. The United States and its allies expressed hope that autocratic regimes would fall and be replaced with democracies, but it did not do too much to ensure that democracy triumphed. It stood back from the civil war in Syria, even when Syrian President Bashir al-Assad used chemical weapons against his own people in 2013. With America absent, Russia became bolder and tougher in its support for al-Assad. The United States focused on the Islamic State after it made dramatic gains in both Syria and Iraq in 2014. Rather than relying on its own infantry, it worked with local forces, notably the Kurds, who ended up



"Let someone else fight over this long blood-stained sand!" President Donald Trump, October 23, 2019.

with little in return. This has raised questions about all American commitments. When questioning whether the United States should continue to get involved in long-standing conflicts, Trump tapped into a strand in U.S. public opinion suggesting that it was time to leave behind “blood-stained deserts.” It was one that President Obama also recognized. This was an area of the world in which U.S. interests appeared either conflicted or hard to discern yet to which it was continually drawn.

For the United States, being a great power has meant entanglements around the world and a sense that letting one partner down will lead to its position being doubted by others. The confusion of Trump’s “Making America Great Again” message is that on the one hand, it appears to be about asserting strength and seeing off rivals, but, on the other, it also means disregarding the interests and concerns of allies. This is evident in setting tariffs on close allies, even based on a claim of national security, and his reluctance to take sides even when an ally or a partner is in dispute. Trump is brazen in his approach, but he is not the first to wonder about the wisdom of promising unconditionally to come to the aid of other people who are apt to get themselves into trouble.

The reason why the international system currently conveys a sense of churn is therefore not primarily because Russia or China want this to be so—although they may well do—but because Trump is questioning the value of an international system his predecessors worked to develop and sustain. Questions are being asked about whether the underlying networks of trade and finance really serve U.S. purposes, and, if they do not, whether the overlay of alliances and strategic partnerships can make much sense. This is, of course, a debate that is far from concluded. Even within Republican Party circles, Trump is still something of an outlier on these questions. But he has introduced a dollop of doubt that those that have relied upon the

United States for security cannot ignore. A serious debate has now begun in Western Europe, led by President Macron of France, as to whether a new security system is becoming necessary—one which accepts a more marginal role for America. Even the country closest to the United States, and now dependent on good relations post-Brexit, has worried aloud about U.S. reliability.

Few are convinced that such a system would be better than the one it would displace. It would cost a lot more for a start. It might not even cohere. This can be seen in debates in the EU over whether a customs union and single market can sustain a currency union and a security network of its own. It is a notable feature of current debates on strategic competition that the United States largely neglects the collection of erstwhile great powers on the other side of the Atlantic as players, yet the logic of the President’s policies has been to encourage them to start to think of themselves as potential strategic competitors rather than natural and long-standing allies. The major European powers certainly have the economic capacity to match Russia, although this would require a significant boost to their defense budgets. For the moment, NATO remains the most established and coherent of all the U.S. alliances and it even has some capacity to survive with a much-reduced American role. The main structural difficulty lies with extended nuclear deterrence. At any rate, NATO is treaty-based, and there is no evident appetite in Washington to abandon it. The issue is more the seriousness with which the current administration takes its alliance obligations, should they be put to the test.

A Would-Be Great Power

This is one reason why these developments seem self-evidently good news for President Putin. From having a marginal role in the Middle East a decade ago, Russia has now moved to center stage. Few countries will now make moves without consulting

Moscow, and Putin has been careful to keep lines open to all players, including Saudi Arabia and Israel. He is now Syria's most important benefactor, more so than Iran. As he will now be aware, the advantages are not self-evident. Syria is broken and Russia lacks the resources to fix it. He needs donors but the most likely donors are unsympathetic to al-Assad. Meanwhile, although the most substantial rebel groups have been defeated, there is still great discontent which is unlikely to be eased by an economic revival in the near future. In addition, the territory has become an arena for a number of external actors, with Turkey wishing to take on the Kurds as well as continual skirmishing between Iran and Israel. Late in his presidency, when he was being criticized for his lack of engagement in Syria, Obama indicated that he thought that Putin was welcome to Syria and its many problems. Russia now has a central position in Middle East affairs, but it is far from hegemonic.

A determination to be recognized as a great power was a feature of the old Soviet Union as much as it is of the new Russia. Once confidence in the innate superiority of Marxism-Leninism—the presumed basis for a world revolution—was lost, Soviet leaders were desperate to get American presidents to acknowledge them as equals. The only area in which this could be done was in military power. That is why so much effort was put into measuring the military balance by counting missiles and their warheads. Putin has acknowledged that, unlike China, Russia cannot be considered an economic superpower. He has insisted, however, that it is a nuclear superpower, a feature to which he drew regular attention in the months after the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Ukraine's Donbas. He was also concerned that despite Russia's veto-wielding permanent membership of the Security Council, the U.S. and the UK consistently refused to consult seriously on their foreign policy gambles and seemed unconcerned that they were

breaking rules they had set for others. Lastly, there was always anxiety that the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were ways of softening countries up for NATO and EU membership and that the ultimate target of this subversion was Russia.

In all of this, Putin was largely thinking about relations with what he would like to consider his peer competitors. In terms of relationships with potential allies and clients, Leninist vanguardism remains strong. The Soviet Union never pretended that the alliance with Mao's China or the Warsaw Pact, bringing together the satellite states in central and eastern Europe, involved equals. In the end, the orders came from Moscow. Even sympathetic Communist parties in non-communist countries were kept under central control through the Comintern. The Soviet leadership questioned its alliance with China when it feared that the adventurism of Mao Zedong would lead to trouble. It was unsure how much support to give Arab clients in the Middle East. In the end, in 1989, it was unwilling to back up its erstwhile puppet regimes in the satellite states.

This has continued with the Russian Federation. Neither Yeltsin nor Putin could accept that the new institutional forms they proposed to establish good working relationships with the other former Soviet states—whether the Commonwealth of Independent States or the Eurasian Union—could be anything other than Russian-led. Russia has a command rather than consultative approach to leadership. This may be cultural but also reflects the narrow basis of its power beyond the purely military means. Its weakness lies in its economy. It always needs to be kept in mind that Russia's GDP is close to Spain's and it has major problems with its infrastructure and lack of investment, long-term environmental and demographic issues, and concerns about corruption and cronyism.

This helps explain why, in an effort to extend its sources of power, it has turned naturally to cyber and information warfare. These tactics certainly add to

its repertoire and much can be achieved at a far lower cost than is the case with traditional forms of hard power. We have discovered how effective they can be, although that discovery also pointed to their practical limitations. Cyber attacks of varying degrees of severity are now a feature of modern life. The attacks can come from computer-literate petty criminals to modern mafias to agents of states looking for ways to harm opponents. We have seen government systems brought down, energy supplies disrupted, and companies pushed into real difficulties. Disruption and interference never feel far away. Yet no country has been brought to its knees with such an attack. The “electronic Pearl Harbor” about which so many have warned has yet to occur. The reasons for this lie partly in the difficulty of mounting such an attack with certainty and partly with a victim’s capacity for recovery. But it also lies with the attacker’s problems with follow-up. For a start, there is the question of attribution. As soon as responsibility is acknowledged, there is the possibility of retaliation in kind or even worse. If no responsibility is acknowledged, how can there be political demands to build on the coercive effect of the attacks? If the victim agrees to some political demands, how can the attacker ensure that they are enforced when there is no desire to escalate to the next step of armed force?

Information operations also raise issues of attribution and potential retaliation, but they are in principle more insidious and effective. If you can get people to doubt their own political systems and despise their own leaders, then they might be open to radical and even insurrectionary suggestions. For an information campaign to be successful it needs to be credible. Brazen lying and bizarre conspiracy theories dreamed up for immediate effect will not do. Successful campaigns will pick up on concerns and ideas rooted in the targeted communities, amplifying key themes and twisting them where possible. We are not talking about precision-guided thoughts that can be lobbed *en masse* into populations as

a form of collective brainwashing so much as an ability to take advantage of disaffection within the target community. There is nothing particularly new with either cyber or information campaigns—in the past they came under the heading of sabotage, subversion, and propaganda. They can now be implemented with great speed and reach, but they have yet to take away from contemporary conflict its indefinite and indecisive character.

Thus, to the extent that Putin’s campaigns against the West have made a difference, this is a function of the West’s failings in the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2007–8 financial crash, and so on. This comes back to the importance of the ideological battle which was generally assumed to have been won in 1990. The idea that liberal capitalism successfully coupled freedom with prosperity has been challenged. The globalism which was celebrated now turns out to have downsides, bringing social dislocation alongside its vaunted economic benefits. The ideological foundations of the Western network have not been wholly eroded but they have been shaken and need refreshment.

Western weakness can help explain the bold Russian action in Syria, but there are limits to Moscow’s ability to construct a wider network. Its armed forces have limited reach, and further military investment may take vital resources away from the economy. It is in no position to hand out too many economic favors. When it has done so it has not always chosen wisely (for example, Venezuela). Nor is there a compelling competing ideology. Putin has offered illiberalism. In his version, he would deny that it was anti-democratic, on the grounds that his approach has popular support and his party wins elections, even if his candidates need some extra-legal help on occasion. It is about supporting national pride and dismissing minority concerns, praising social and religious conservatism. By its nature this is an ideology that has an appeal to elites even if it is naturally associated with populism.

He is not the only leader to find illiberalism attractive. This is an ideological predisposition that has echoes elsewhere in Europe, notably in former communist states. It can be found in Erdogan's Turkey and in Xi's China. President Trump might be tempted. By its nature, however, hardline nationalism is an awkward basis for a universal ideology, as the harder it gets the more it must worry about being contaminated and diluted by others. Polish nationalism is at odds with Russian nationalism even though there may be similar socio-political attitudes. The degree of authoritarianism also varies. Few political systems can suppress all dissenting views, especially when elections still take place. In the end, if there can be only one approved view the system becomes rigid and the leaders hear only themselves. If you live by fake news, in the end you will confuse yourself.

This is one reason why illiberalism lacks a record of economic success. The more illiberal countries in the EU benefit from the single market. Elsewhere, however, the tendency is for the elite to use the system to avoid accountability, which encourages corruption and discourages enterprise. Neither Russia nor Turkey has been able to demonstrate that illiberalism brings economic benefits. China is the example to show that it can deliver, but of course much of its most spectacular growth occurred when it was still relatively open and had a rotating leadership.

A Rising Great Power

Today China is seen as the natural successor to the United States as the dominant power. Its dramatic economic growth has propelled it from an also-ran into the front rank of powers. It also has size. Its territory is vast and its population large. In addition, after downplaying its great power ambitions, it has recently become more open and assertive. It has been throwing its weight about its region in an old-fashioned sense of redrawing borders to suit itself, notably in the South China

Sea. Should Taiwan declare itself independent from the mainland, Beijing has declared that this would be a declaration of civil war and it would respond accordingly. China is also acutely conscious of the ideological aspects of power. With its collectivist and Leninist roots, it is now taking illiberalism to new levels. It is exploring elaborate forms of social control, using the most advanced technologies to do so, keeping track of any dissident behavior and cracking down hard on dissident communities (most cruelly the Uyghurs). Its standards for what is and is not acceptable behavior has been extended quite vigorously to its external relations, taking exception to any criticism and always looking to punish the critics. The complex interaction between its domestic affairs and international status has been demonstrated by its struggle to cope with the Coronavirus and the closure of borders and air connections.

Its size and economic importance mean that arguably China does not need to develop its own international network to promote its great power status. Yet it is doing so with its Belt and Road Initiative, which is establishing infrastructure projects in numerous locales across the world. If this is successful, it could create a remarkable inter-connected network of interests that would underpin China's global role. Just as likely, the success will be patchy. Many of the countries chosen for projects are unstable and have poor development records, and major infrastructure projects may not serve them well. As these projects often rely on Chinese expertise and capabilities, they do not always benefit the local population. Lacking a secure economic basis, they can become a source of debt, which is likely to be hung around the supposed beneficiaries. There have been accusations of neo-colonialism. There is also the question of the security of the projects and personnel and how China will protect those who get caught up in conflicts.

A rule of thumb might be that where Chinese investment can provide a real stimulus it will be



Aerial view of Gwadar (Balochistan), western Pakistan, by the Arab Sea. This port is being leased to China for 43 years under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and is part of China's "String of Pearls." (Bjoertvedt, November 7, 2016)

successful, though this will be in countries that already have reasonably mature economies, but that elsewhere it may be accumulating liabilities and resentments. The main point, however, is to recognize the initiative as a way of establishing a great power status beyond its regional position and that it does not avoid the issues with all attempts to do this, including the needs of those who have accepted a degree of dependency. Moreover, its readiness to assert its power has led to it being treated warily not only by the United States but also other regional powers. Japan, India, Indonesia, and Australia are all watching it carefully.

So, while great power status is assumed to be the natural objective for large states, it can be a mixed blessing. There are satisfactions to be gained in getting one's way and setting conditions to which others must adjust as best they can. But to the extent

that their expanded influence depends on the acquiescence and support of others, they acquire obligations which they are not always willing or able to discharge. As soon as they fail to assist their supporters, they lose some of the aura of power. The habits and expectations associated with great power status are embedded in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, but now less so in London, Paris, and Berlin. They were once imperial capitals, proud of the territories they had conquered and ready to hold on to them tenaciously even as local populations objected and resisted. Their empires defined them as international players and shaped their armed forces and diplomatic endeavors. Eventually they became untenable. The processes of decolonization were often painful and there are legacy issues. But there are no serious suggestions that this is an age to which Western European countries would wish to

return even if they could. Issues of power and interest never go away. Questions of values and ideology will continue to influence international behavior. But at some point, the idea that great power status is something to be sought and welcomed for its own sake may also appear anomalous. **PRISM**

Notes

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