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Introduction

THE WORLD has changed. Over the past decade, we have witnessed a distinct shift toward a renewed competition between the great powers. The green light that China seems to have given to Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and its subsequent saber-rattling over Taiwan six months later only served to reinforce concerns that have been building within the American foreign policy community since at least 2010. Just how intense this great power competition will become is uncertain. But what seems clear is that the optimism of the 1990s—when pundits and politicians alike saw growing economic interdependence and a rules-based international order as fostering long-term prosperity and peace between the United States, China, and Russia—is gone. In its place is talk of new cold wars and even military conflict. A rising China now seems willing to flex its muscles not just in its region but around the globe. Leaders in Beijing have not only challenged the U.S. navy for dominance in the South China Sea and the Pacific but also have signaled that they intend to extend China's economic and political influence not just to Eurasia and Africa, but to an area Americans have always considered their backyard: Latin America. Russia, with a GDP the size of Italy, may have been reduced to the status of a middle power within the larger Sino-American competition. Yet its leaders' very resentment of this fact, combined with Russia's vast energy resources and the willingness to take military actions against neighbors—Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022—make Russia a continued threat to the global economic and political system. Even if Russian leaders cannot contribute to this system, they can undermine it, thereby interfering with the plans of both the United States and China as they struggle for more influence and control around the world.

Russia's continued ability to play the role of spoiler, however, should not distract us from a larger geopolitical fact: it is the bipolar struggle between the United States and China that is the new Great Game of the twenty-first century. Because both sides have nuclear weapons, we can expect leaders in Washington and Beijing to be inherently reluctant to engage in behavior that

might raise the risk of actual war. And we can be thankful that at least one key lesson came out of the Cold War: that neither side can afford to push the system to anything that looks remotely like the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. This is the good news.

Yet as this book shows, there is also bad, or at least concerning, news. Great powers need continued economic prosperity to support their militaries and to ensure that they can maintain stability at home in the face of other states' possible efforts to subvert it. They thus have an ongoing drive to expand their economic and commercial power spheres beyond their borders, and to support these spheres with strong navies and offensive power-projection capability. The American ongoing military presence in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific regions since World War II and China's growing naval support for its Belt and Road Initiative are only two obvious examples from recent history. This means that even in the nuclear age, great powers will struggle to improve their geoeconomic positions around the world. They will worry that their adversaries might decide to cut them off from access to vital raw materials, investments, and markets ("RIM"). In short, *commercial struggles* for prosperity and position remain an essential element of great power grand strategy, and these struggles can end up leading to crises that increase the probability of devastating war between the powers.

To see the inherent dangers, we need only remember that the Second World War in the Pacific came directly out of the tightening of an economic noose around Japan beginning in the early 1930s and ending with a total allied embargo on oil exports to Japan in 1941. Chinese leaders are very much aware that the scenario of 1941, even more than that of 1914, is the one to avoid. Yet like Japanese leaders after 1880, they also know that China must work hard to extend its commercial presence, even at the risk of a spiral of hostility, if it is to sustain the growth that has made it the stable and secure superpower that it is today. This tension between needing to expand one's economic sphere of influence and wanting to avoid an escalatory spiral that might restrict access to vital goods and markets is baked into the DNA of modern great power politics. It is a tension, as we will see, that the United States has faced repeatedly since the founding of the American republic.

When it comes to explaining how competitions over commerce affect the likely behavior of great powers, there are two big questions that need to be examined in depth. What exactly is the role that commerce plays in driving states *either* toward more accommodating soft-line actions *or* toward more assertive hard-line postures, including the initiation of military containment and war against adversaries? And how significant is this role compared to the many other causes of cooperation and conflict that scholars have identified? This book seeks to answer these questions through a study of American

foreign policy from the eighteenth century to contemporary U.S.-China relations. Yet this is not simply a book that explores the fascinating changes in American behavior toward the outside world since 1750 and then applies historical lessons to twenty-first century geopolitics. More than that, it represents a test of the relative explanatory power of the key theories of international relations (IR) for one very important country over time and across highly varied circumstances. These theories can be divided into two main groups: "realist" theories that focus on *how threats external to a state* will force almost any type of leader or elite group toward similar policies; and "liberal" theories that emphasize *how forces internal to a state* shape and constrain its behavior independent of the effects of the external factors. It is clear to nearly all IR scholars that the United States, due to its strong liberal democratic foundations, poses a hard case for any realist theory, including the one offered here. We just expect American leaders to "think differently" about global affairs, and to be guided more by a sense of moral values, domestic pressures, and ideological ends than by traditional European notions of *Realpolitik*. So as that great philosopher (and sometime singer) Frank Sinatra might have said, if realist theory can make it here, it should be able to make it anywhere.

This book has three specific goals. The first is the building of a better, more dynamic realist theory of international relations, one that can resolve some of the problems with the two main versions of systemic realism in the field—namely, offensive realism and defensive realism. Systemic realists start with the common assumption that in anarchy, with no central authority to protect them, great powers will be primarily driven by factors that transcend domestic issues: factors such as differentials in relative power and uncertainty about the economic and military threats that other states pose, now and into the future. Yet offensive and defensive realists remain divided over the role of such systemic forces. By bringing together the insights of both forms of realism, the book establishes a stronger foundation for thinking about how states grapple with trade-offs presented by their external situations. Great powers do worry about building power positions that can handle problems that may arise in the future, as offensive realists stress. But they are also concerned that being overly assertive in the pursuit of this position can lead them into undesired spirals of hostility and conflict, as defensive realists emphasize.

By fusing these insights and then extending them into the realm of commercial geopolitics, this book goes beyond the limitations of current realist theory. It reveals the importance of two crucial variables to the decision-making process of any great power: the intensity of a state's drive to extend and protect its economic power sphere to ensure a base-line level of access to key raw materials, investments, and markets; and leader expectations about how willing adversaries are to allow the state future access to areas of trade and

finance beyond its immediate power sphere. Modern realist theories tend to focus primarily on the military and territorial aspects of the great power security competition, downplaying the economic. These former aspects are important, to be sure. But by tying drives for *commercial* spheres of influence to *expectations of trade beyond those spheres*, I show that the overall trade environment and the way leaders anticipate changes in that environment regularly play an even more fundamental role in driving the foreign policies of great powers.

The second main goal of the book is to show that this new more dynamic and commercial approach to systemic realism can more than hold its own with the very case that has always proved problematic for realism: the United States and its foreign policies over the last two and a half centuries. Contemporary realists often buy into the liberal premise that America is exceptional, that it is founded in an ideology that rejected "Old World" aristocratic power politics in favor of the liberal pursuit of individual happiness, and that this outlook often leads the United States to act in ways that are contrary to realist predictions. Such realists are inclined to accept traditional arguments that the perceived need to spread democracy or protect liberal institutions abroad have been driving forces for why American leaders moved to a more globalist strategy after 1916 and why Washington continues to promote "liberal hegemony" long after the end of the Cold War. This starting assumption can lead offensive and defensive realists to give too much away to domestic-level explanations for American foreign policy behavior. To be sure, U.S. leaders and officials have at times sought to extend American liberalism's reach when they could do so at low cost or when having liberal states in one's sphere was seen as essential to countering the extension of an opponent's sphere, as during the Cold War. And at certain points in U.S. history, as I show, bottom-up domestic pressures within a pluralist American state did indeed play important roles in shaping policy. This book's empirical chapters demonstrate, however, that the importance of commercial and power-political factors on American foreign policy behavior over the last two and a half centuries has been significantly underplayed, at least by political scientists if not always by neo-Marxist revisionist historians. From the formation of the republic to the current era, U.S. leaders, concerned about long-term national security, have been driven by a combination of commercial factors and relative power trends that have often overshadowed the ideological and domestic determinants of foreign policy. Americans, it turns out, are extremely smart and savvy realists, precisely because they have intuitively understood from the get-go the importance of dynamically fusing offensive and defensive realist insights with commercial power politics.

In the testing of its dynamic realist approach, this book does something unusual. Almost every book of historically based political science tries to set its theory against "competing arguments" in order to show that the causal

factors posited by other theories are less useful in explaining the empirical cases of conflict and war than the pet theory of the book in question. This leads to endless cycles of debate as to which scholar's factors were most critical to the understanding of controversial cases. My method is different. By recognizing that almost every case involves numerous key causal factors, I seek to identify the *causal role* that these factors are playing in a particular case, such as Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I or Franklin Roosevelt's and Harry Truman's policies that helped establish the post–World War II global order. Specifically, I ask questions such as: To what extent was a factor *propelling* the leader to act, rather than acting as a *facilitating* factor for that action, or perhaps as a *constraining factor* that forced the postponement of the action? Was the factor merely *accelerating* the leader's timetable for action or perhaps only *reinforcing* the original decision by giving added reasons to act, rather than being the factor that propelled the leader to act in the first place? As I discuss in chapter 2, by analyzing the various roles different causal factors play within any particular "bundle" of factors leading to an important event in world history, we can provide nuanced understandings of history while at the same time isolating "what was really driving the event" as opposed to simply helping bring it on or change the manner in which it occurred.

This book examines almost all the cases of American foreign policy history after 1760 where there was a significant shift toward conflict or away from conflict with other states. Although this makes for a longer book, covering so many cases avoids biasing the research toward events that support one's theory, while helping scholars and practitioners understand the full scope of causal forces that are at work across time and for very different sets of both domestic and international conditions. There are cases that do not work for my theory, such as the 1835–42 disputes with Britain over Canada, the inward turn from 1865 to 1885, and important aspects of America's twenty-five-year involvement in Vietnam. Finding such problematic cases is a *good* thing. Since no theory in social science can (or should try to) explain everything, such negative cases serve to highlight—for both theorists and policy makers—the conditions under which a theory likely will and *will not* be useful.

This caveat notwithstanding, the broad sweep of cases covered in this book reveals an important pattern. From the get-go, American leaders were very concerned about maintaining and enhancing a core economic power sphere that would ensure access to key trading partners, initially in the neighborhood and then around the world. When these leaders were confident about future commerce and believed that trade was helping to build a strong and growing base of economic power, they were inclined to maintain peaceful relations with European and Asian great powers, even when ideological and domestic variables were pushing for conflict. When, however, their expectations of

future trade turned sour and they saw others trying to restrict American access to the vital goods and markets needed for economic growth, these leaders almost invariably turned nasty—and for national security reasons, not for fear of the loss of elite power and wealth as left-leaning revisionist scholars typically argue. American decision-makers knew that without a forceful response to the other states' policies, the long-term security of the nation would be put at risk. A weakened economy at home would have reduced the nation's ability to protect its interests and might even leave the homeland vulnerable to attack or outside efforts to subvert the social order. Commercial ties, therefore, proved critical in pushing American leaders either toward peace or toward war, depending on whether their expectations of the future were optimistic or pessimistic and whether American and foreign diplomacy was seen as able to overcome mistrust and foster positive expectations into the future.

The empirical chapters begin with the War for Colonial Independence by adding a commercial explanation of the origins of the war to the ideological and domestic-political ones of traditional historiography. I seek to answer a puzzle that historians often ignore or downplay: why were the British North American colonies from 1763 to 1773 so reluctant to begin a war with the mother country, Britain, and yet why did they ultimately, and as a cohesive group, choose to undertake such a risky move? I argue that the war for independence was initiated not only to defend the concept of personal liberty—a taken-for-granted notion since Britain's Glorious Revolution of 1688—but to safeguard American commercial and economic growth in the face of London's determined efforts to restrict the rise of an increasingly vibrant British North America. The continuation of the liberties and society that the colonists had come to value were seen as intimately tied to the continued development of trade; without the latter, the local power structures that protected the former would decline over the long term.

The subsequent conflicts of the young republic were also driven by fears for long-term commercial access and the economic growth needed to protect the unique American republican experiment. The War of 1812 may have been about the safeguarding of republicanism in a general sense, as some historians suggest. But it was not a war chosen to protect the power of certain parties or to give western and southern "war hawks" more land for territorial expansion. Rather, President Madison reluctantly moved to war as a response to British policies that had shut U.S. products out of the European continent, policies that would have hurt the nation's viability as a republic into the future. Similarly, President Polk did not initiate the war against Mexico in 1846 to extend slavery westward or to make his Democratic Party more popular, but to preempt an expected British move to acquire California and then use its ports to dominate the burgeoning trade with China and the Far East. If he could not

secure this future trade, the nation itself would be more vulnerable to the economic and political predations of European powers.

By the late nineteenth century, the United States had become what it was not in 1812 or 1846—namely, a real player in the great power game. But its position was still vulnerable, albeit in a different way. To continue its industrial growth and to protect its increasing overseas trade—the growth of which was set in motion by the policies of the 1840s—U.S. leaders had come to see the importance of securing the American commercial position in the Caribbean and the Far East against the increasingly expansionistic powers of Britain and Germany. When a humanitarian crisis arose in Cuba after 1896, President McKinley was initially reluctant to act. By early 1898, however, with China being carved up by the European powers and a Central American canal needed to complete Alfred Thayer Mahan's vision of the United States as a secure naval and commercial power, McKinley shifted gears. He became convinced that a war with Spain over Cuba would kill two birds with one stone: it would not only solve the humanitarian crisis but would allow the taking of Spanish territories needed to counter British and German commercial expansionism in the Far East and the Caribbean.

Perhaps the most surprising case of the book is the 1917 U.S. intervention into World War I. Almost every historian of this intervention suggests that Woodrow Wilson was reluctant to enter the war but felt forced to do so in order to have a say at the peace table and to help to reshape the world according to his liberal ideological vision—a vision that included promoting democracy and collective security as alternatives to traditional balance of power politics. The truth is much more complex and interesting. Wilson did harbor thoughts from his first days in office that the world would be a better place if it had more liberal democracies, especially ones trading freely with each other. But he also understood that global politics was about trade-offs. And if he had to choose between spreading democracy and protecting U.S. trade access, the latter would have to come first. It was only later in the war, with an allied victory on the horizon, that Wilson gave free rein to his more idealistic fantasy of remaking the world in the American image. Up until that point, his primary goal was to protect America's economic power position in the western hemisphere and in Asia from threats of great power encroachment.

This broader objective was in place from his first month in office in March 1913 and it continually shaped his willingness to contain civil conflicts in Central America and the Caribbean prior to and during the European war. Wilson's liberal mindset shaped his perception of which states were seen as the greatest threats to U.S. commerce through the Panama Canal and in the Far East: namely, the great rising neo-mercantilist nations of Germany and Japan. Spreading liberal democracy was at best an occasional means to his

larger geopolitical ends. That the nation's commercial security was foremost in his mind is shown by his great concern in mid to late 1916 that *Britain* had perhaps become the greatest threat to U.S. trade in the western hemisphere. Germany's shift to unrestricted submarine warfare and its encouraging of a Mexican attack on the United States in early 1917 made it clear that war to ensure a British-French victory would be necessary. But when he told Congress on April 2 that the world must be made "safe for democracy," his main goal remained Germany's defeat and the denial of its penetration into the western hemisphere, not the more expansive objective of consolidating global democracy that would show itself at Versailles two years later. Until the end of 1917, for example, he worked hard to pull Austria-Hungary out of the war by promising Vienna that it could keep its oppressive multiethnic empire. As in the War of 1812, a war whose parallels Wilson keenly understood, ensuring trade access and U.S. economic security proved to be the primary motivating reason for war.

I have covered the decision-making of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that led to the U.S. entry into the Second World War in a previous book, so I only briefly discuss those decisions as part of a larger consideration of the U.S. turn to "globalism" after 1940. I show that Roosevelt's concerns for Hitler's Germany after 1935 initially resembled Woodrow Wilson's regarding Germany from 1913 to 1917. He worried that if Hitler were ever able to defeat the other European great powers, Germany could then directly threaten the strong U.S. commercial and geopolitical position in the western hemisphere. But after France's defeat in June 1940, FDR realized he had to go much further than Wilson. He saw that the increasingly complex U.S. economy needed access to Eurasia and Southeast Asia, and that if Germany proved able to eliminate its adversaries in continental Europe, it posed a direct threat to America's long-term power position. He thus adopted a strategy of holding Germany to Europe and North Africa as he consolidated a "Grand Area" that would contain German growth in the short term and hopefully lead to an eventual American victory over Nazism in the long term. Once Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in late June 1941, however, FDR immediately saw that he needed to supply Stalin with the military equipment and resources he needed to stop Germany from controlling Eurasia. He feared that Japan would take advantage of Hitler's action and go north, splitting Russian forces in two and allowing Germany to win control of the Eurasian heartland, giving it an impenetrable base for future expansion of its closed economic sphere. He thus cut Japan off from access to oil and raw materials, forcing it to launch a war south rather than going north, and saving Stalin from a two-front war. The strategy worked, and by mid-1943, German forces were in retreat. Yet the larger strategy for a Grand Area of trade and bases led by the United States was kept in place. By

late 1943, the United States was already preparing for the coming struggle over economic and military power spheres with a victorious Russia—a struggle that would see America emerge in a dominant position by 1945.

For most realist and liberal scholars, the ensuing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, with its numerous crises and war scares, seems to be the kind of conflict that cannot be explained by commercial factors. After all, with little trade between the two superpowers after 1945, we should expect commerce to drop out as a potentially important cause of either conflict or cooperation. But to think in this way is to think only in terms of snapshots of trade at any point in time. I show that expectations of future trade were critical in many of the key Cold War crises, and in the start of the Cold War itself. In 1945, both sides sought to stabilize the peace through commercial means that would maintain the high level of cooperation they had realized during the war. But extraneous factors, particularly the economic chaos in Europe after the war, made it impossible for either side to believe that trade and financial flows between their spheres could be maintained. The ideological divide made things worse, since the Americans worried that states in western Europe that fell to Communism would quickly join the closed economic realm of the Soviet Union. With each side fearing that the other was trying to improve its economic position at its own expense, a Cold War struggle for economic power spheres in Europe and Asia became inevitable.

For the next four decades, the ups and downs of American-Soviet relations had much to do with perceptions of threats to commerce and with perceptions that trade expectations could be improved by diplomatic negotiations and détente. While many of the key superpower standoffs of the 1950s and 1960s were shaped by trade expectations, two in particular were not: the Berlin Crisis of 1948 and the Korean War of 1950–53. Here, I briefly explore the noncommercial forces behind these conflicts. I also consider the case of Vietnam, 1948 to 1965, which partly works for my argument and partly does not. From 1948 through the 1950s, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations saw Vietnam as critical to helping Japan rebuild economically and play its key role in the U.S.-led alliance structure. By the early 1960s, however, with Japan's economy having rebounded, a more purely geopolitical fear—the fear of falling dominos—took over and led to the disastrous U.S. policy from 1963 to 1972. I then turn to the economic diplomacy of efforts to reduce superpower tensions after 1955. On two main occasions, in 1971–73 and in 1987–90, Americans held out the carrot of future trade deals to help secure the agreements that initially moderated the intensity of the Cold War and then ended it for good. I also show, perhaps surprisingly, that there was an opportunity for a commerce-based détente in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy seriously contemplated offering the prospect of increased trade

in return for promises of more moderate Soviet behavior in the Cold War, including in the now-decolonizing Global South (the "Third World"). Unfortunately, the conditions for a peace deal in the late 1950s and early 1960s were not yet in place—in particular, neither side yet had a secure nuclear second-strike to deter attacks on the homeland. Once they were in place, expectations of future trade shaped by astute diplomacy could play a key role in the eventual ending of the Cold War.

The final chapter fulfills the third goal of the book—namely, to use the theoretical and historical insights of the first ten chapters to analyze the implications of different scenarios for the future stability of U.S.-China relations. Notwithstanding Russia's continued ability to disrupt the system, at least on its own immediate periphery, in larger grand strategic terms it is the geopolitical competition between the United States and the new Chinese superpower that matters. No one can predict whether China will keep growing or will peak in relative power before overtaking the United States, nor can one predict the nature of the Chinese state and its goals in another ten or twenty years. But we *can* use well-developed international relations theories such as the dynamic realist theory of this book to predict how and why the United States will likely *respond* to the different scenarios that could arise, depending on combinations of these power and domestic regime-type variables. If U.S. leaders and officials can properly understand what these scenarios entail, and how they can best deal with the dangers and opportunities in each, we may be able to avoid the mistakes of the past that have led to unnecessary wars and the devastation of societies.

To conclude this introduction, let me suggest that different audiences will want to read this book in different ways. I have designed the chapters so the general reader interested mostly in the historical cases can read just the introductory chapter and parts of chapter 1 and then jump to the historical analyses of chapters 3 to 9 and the evaluation of the future of U.S.-China relations in chapter 10. Scholars of international relations and political science will want to examine the full explication of the theory of this book in chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 sets down the foundations of the dynamic realist theory of the book. It accepts the offensive realist insight that great powers are driven to expand their spheres of influence to hedge against future problems. Yet I show that this insight is even more relevant to economic and commercial spheres than to the military and territorial ones typically stressed by offensive realists.

Chapter 2 extends the initial analysis by bringing in defensive realist insights on the character type of the adversary as well as on the security dilemma and the related reality of feedback loops between hard-line behavior and spirals of hostility and commercial restrictions. Rational security-driven leaders will understand that they must calibrate the severity of their policies based on

variations in character type. They will also know that they will have to balance their desires to expand their nations' economic power spheres with the risks of provoking increasing restrictions on their global trade. Chapter 2 also lays out the alternative method of "doing" historical case analysis, one which focuses on identifying the causal roles of the different factors involved in a case, rather than trying to disconfirm competing explanations for specific cases. It thus provides a way to help both international relations scholars and historians avoid talking at cross-purposes, and to see the value of debating not *whether* specific factors were important to explaining changes in state behavior over time but rather *how* such factors were operating in the cases—whether they were propelling leaders to act as opposed to, say, facilitating, constraining, or accelerating their actions. If done properly, this approach to history can help decision-makers understand the conditions under which certain policies will lead to a stable peace or to destabilizing conflicts. And, of course, we can all hope that as the subtlety of their understanding grows over time, better policies will emerge.

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