POWER RULES

HOW COMMON SENSE CAN RESCUE AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

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THE HAMILTON AND JEFFERSON camps, along with their soft- and hard-power descendants, are still alive and well and largely intact. They are smart, knowledgeable, and talented professionals, and practiced warriors. They also continue to reflect the two gut impulses of American foreign policy—the power of love and the love of power, soft and hard. Americans don't want their power raw; it has to be sautéed in the best of causes. But Americans do love to feel that their country is powerful, and that their leaders will excel at transforming the world into a better and safer place.

Neither group has gotten power right. And as long as these two traditions, with all their flaws, continue to dominate the public debate, America's enormous world power will remain hobbled. But there is some light in this tunnel.

The Clinton administration, its occasional successes notwithstanding, largely weakened the Jeffersonian soft-power school. And George W. Bush's tenure thoroughly discredited the Hamiltonian hard-power contingent. Obama seems headed toward a greater willingness to trust American power through negotiations, though he still shrouds exactly how he will use that power both to compromise and to make successful demands.

Promising for future policy debates, the realists of both the Truman-Acheson variety like senators Joseph Biden and Sam Nunn and the Republican realists such as Kissinger, Baker, and Scowcroft are receiving a fairer hearing once again. These realists have more in common with one another than with the liberals and conservatives of their own political parties. American foreign policy would profit if they backed one another more and their political parties less.

There's an opening now to strengthen the concept and the operations of American power. The first step is to get a realistic grasp on the new structure and distribution of international power. The second is to figure out how to work with this new power distribution and the limits it places on America's still formidable power.

CHAPTER 4

THE NEW PYRAMID OF WORLD POWER

International power is not flat; it's pyramidal. The lion's share of the power sits in the top tiers, disproportionately with the United States and a second tier of major powers. But power is also dispersed below to unprecedented and complicating degrees. The result has been piles of dangerous stalemates, which can be fixed only by new approaches to organizing and managing power.

The history-enders are at it again. Twenty years ago, they said history had ended because America had triumphed over the Soviet Union, leaving America dominant and undisputed by any nation or ideology. History was finished because the United States could now simply dictate it. Not many years later, new post-history buffs are trying their hand for the opposite reason. They say history is over because the world has caught up with the United States, thus leveling and equalizing power. The United States is not nearly strong enough in the twenty-first century, they contend, to make history, shape great events, or solve major international problems.

But the history-enders are wrong: History continues because power and power struggles continue to rule the international arena, and because the fate of nations and peoples still hangs in the balance. History is still up to its usual tricks and mysteries, including an in-

triguing mix of old and new power configurations and instruments. This condition should be pushing us to figure out what's new and old in global politics and how to exercise power in this ever-unfolding world. But for a variety of reasons, that's not what we're doing.

There's never been anything quite like the world of this century, and the changes can be befuddling. That uncertainty is especially stark compared with the relative stability of the Cold War and the dependable balance of power that existed in Europe from the sixteenth through the twentieth century, when imperial maneuvers were disturbed by only the occasional Napoleon or Hitler. Les Aspin, Bill Clinton's embattled first defense secretary, expressed his exasperation about getting a handle on events as follows: "Even the experts couldn't make up what's going on out there."

Understanding what's happening in the world has been additionally obscured by several fashionable but misleading metaphors about the structure and distribution of international power. For one, many insist that the world is flat. But while it surely has flattened somewhat, it most certainly is nowhere near flat. Though power is now more dispersed than ever, the disparities in power remain vast and stark. For another, some argue that the world is nonpolar. It would be far more accurate, however, to see the world as a unique blend of unipolarity and multipolarity—with the United States clearly alone at the top, and with many other nations possessing highly varied degrees and kinds of power.

Today's world is neither flat nor nonpolar, but pyramidal: The United States stands alone at the pinnacle, with formidable and unique global powers of leadership, but not the power to dominate. Stacked below are many tiers of states, with most power still concentrated at the top tiers among relatively few states.

This distribution of power in the world is pretty clear. What's not clear is how to use power effectively in this new pyramidal, unipolar, multipolar context. So few nations have the power to get things done, and so many have the power to delay and resist. In such a universe, it becomes particularly difficult to solve major problems such as trade logjams, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and global warming. Many sores linger and fester. Also, many of the most serious problems occur within nations, beyond the reach of even the strongest countries. Most problems now are less susceptible to good old-fashioned and decisive military force, and more amenable to the less visible and slower tugs of economic and diplomatic power. And many problems persist, interestingly, because the newly empowered countries of Asia are not yet ready to use their new powers as aggressively as the old Europe once employed its considerable powers. For Washington to wield power well in this universe requires a profound and creative understanding of these new dimensions of power, starting with the pyramid at its center.

IN THE NEW PYRAMID of power, the United States stands as the only country capable of global action and leadership on almost every major issue. There are very few situations, however, where Washington can prevail on its own. There are now precious few Panamas where a president can launch an attack, win decisively within weeks, and install a new and friendly government. As for diplomatic triumphs, getting Libya to abandon its weapons of mass destruction resulted as much from Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's own desire for more economic breathing room as from American pressure.

Nonetheless, there should be no doubting America's paramount position. Its economy outstrips all the other individual economies and is surpassed only by the entire European Union. China and India will take decades to catch up, if they ever catch up at all. While America now has competitors in technology and technological innovation, it remains the leader in those areas as well. And its military superiority far surpasses its economic advantages. The United States spent about as much on its armed forces in 2008 as all the other major industrial nations combined. More tellingly, it is in a class by itself in terms of usable military technology—the mix of hardware, software, and organization. On the diplomatic front, almost all countries turn to Washington, happily or otherwise, and regardless of whether they ultimately follow Washington. Only the

United States can act anywhere on virtually any military, economic, or diplomatic front. And in most parts of the world, the United States is also the sole guarantor of regional balances of power: for many Asians against China, for the Europeans against Russia, and for the Sunni Arabs against Shiite Iran. Despite these facts, America's preeminence is now regularly challenged by foreign policy experts and our own intelligence community. An intelligence study in late 2008 held that the United States has lost its position of dominance and is likely in fifteen years to become merely first among equal major powers. But this study doesn't really support the claim that the United States ever really was dominant and doesn't explain what the United States could do in the coming decade to avoid the loss of its central leadership power, which is at the heart of its power in the twenty-first century, as distinct from any prior era of mythical dominance.

The weight of the evidence is that America remains at the top of the international food chain and has unique powers to lead with regard to the most important and toughest international issues—ranging from nuclear proliferation and security to issues of trade, environmental issues, failed states, and health issues such as HIV/AIDS and pandemics. No other nation can play this role. No collection of other nations can play this role.

The second tier of countries consists of China, Japan, India, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and just barely Brazil. Call them The Eight Principals, or simply The Eight. If Washington is the sole leader, they are the principals or managing directors of the global realm. Their views generally have to be taken into account globally and on many regional questions, but their economies and military capabilities do not permit them to take decisive or leading roles, either individually or collectively. They don't delude themselves by thinking they are equal to the United States. In many respects, they are more regional than global powers. But each possesses enough power to provide essential support to joint efforts with the United States and to block or seriously impede action by Washington.

All eight have narrowed the economic gaps between themselves and the United States and are now competitive with America on many economic fronts. Western Europe and Japan have counted economically for some time, but their economies are not as dynamic as America's. As for China, India, Brazil, and Russia, they have only very recently come to the fore in terms of trade and investment. Because of their dynamism and their relative novelty as economic players, experts usually overvalue their economies and their economic power. For example, China's GDP was roughly half of America's by 2008 estimates, and all the rest are smaller. For all of America's current economic ills, it remains the biggest and best market and a model of relative stability and continued potential for investment. It is Washington, not The Eight, that continues to grip the reins of leadership in organizations such as the World Trade Organization and the World Bank.

Militarily, The Eight are simply not first-tier powers. Neither alone nor jointly can they deploy or sustain significant military action beyond their borders. Only the United States can. All except Japan, Brazil, and Germany have nuclear weapons. China and Russia cannot be defeated in their homelands with conventional weapons, but by the same token, they can themselves apply decisive nonnuclear force only on or near their borders.

The diplomatic power of The Eight derives mainly from their economies and, in particular, their global trading and investment relationships. The size of their economies gives them a major role in worldwide negotiations on trade, energy, and the environment. Their financial and trading activities also make them vital to the success of economic sanctions. Simply put, no economic sanctions can be effective without them. If Burma can still turn to China for economic support, its dictators can survive a cutoff by almost all other nations. Washington can make economic life difficult for Iran as punishment for its pursuit of nuclear weapons, but as long as Tehran can trade with Russia, China, Germany, and Japan, it remains viable. No amount of American economic and diplomatic pressure on North Korea could have stayed Pyongyang's hand on its

nuclear programs as long as China remained in Pyongyang's corner. Many of The Eight also benefit diplomatically by having vetoes as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Of the lot, China has the greatest potential to become a global power. Even today, it has clout in many African and Latin American countries because of its power to buy local resources and make local investments. Overall, however, China and the rest of The Eight do not play an active role in diplomacy worldwide. They mostly counterpunch and complain—sometimes justifiably—about Washington, and about whoever sits in the White House. Mostly, they wait for Washington to organize action they think will fit their interests.

There is a third, narrow band of oil-producing states—the Oil and Gas Pumpers—that includes Saudi Arabia, Iran, the smaller Gulf states, Venezuela, and Nigeria (and obviously Russia as well). Their power derives from their large share of the global oil and gas supplies and the investment clout of their profits. They are essentially Enablers, helping to make things happen at home or abroad. The Saudis could use their money to buy weapons for the Afghan mujahideen to fight the Soviets. Iran can fund Hezbollah radicals in Lebanon. President Hugo Chávez can finance his populism at home and throw a few petrodollars to needy potential supporters elsewhere.

Iran remains a major producer, but it is a much larger and poorer country than most of its Arab neighbors, so its power is as an exporter and not as an investor. Russia also fits in this third tier (as well as in the second) now that it is the second-largest oil producer and largest natural gas producer in the world and turns profits into investments downstream in Europe. Nigeria has copious oil income and overwhelming problems at home.

For the most part, the oil-tier Enabler states stick to counting their profits rather than leveraging their resources for political bargaining. On occasion, Arab oil producers do make noises to encourage Western countries and Japan to be more sympathetic to Palestinian demands. Moscow has also begun flexing its energy muscles on diplomatic fronts. In sum, their oil resources and their liquid money have won them everyone's ear and a serious hearing of their

concerns. That remained true, even in the financial crisis of 2008 attended by falling oil prices. The general assumption was and remains that those prices will rise again as national economies recover.

The fourth tier consists of mid-level states with mostly localized potential as Regional Players. This group includes Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, Pakistan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Most are far behind most of the top three tiers economically. Some, such as Pakistan and South Korea, have substantial military strength for self-defense. If a problem is in their own backyards—Afghanistan for Pakistan or North Korea for South Korea—they will have an important voice in regional diplomatic parleys, but not usually a decisive one. Washington is still the leading and indispensable negotiator on North Korea and Afghanistan. Though Taiwan has a decent-size economy, it will continue to depend on America for its security—and that factor will ensure Washington's major role in Taiwanese-related issues. Pakistan, which also has nuclear weapons, exercises basic control of its own affairs, be they internal issues or fighting the Taliban within its borders, despite its economic dependence on America. Islamabad's power in these respects derives from Pakistan's size, location, and technological sophistication in certain military areas, but also, paradoxically, from its vulnerability to terrorists or extremists. This weakness permits them to deflect Washington's efforts to shove it hard toward internal reforms.

The fifth tier—which can be classified as Responsibles—encompasses as many as fifty states, medium and small, all over the map. Most are responsible world citizens such as Switzerland, Norway, Singapore, Botswana, and Chile. Many can mostly care for themselves and tend to their own needs, but don't cut a lot of ice with the major powers. They generally neither make nor submit to demands.

The sixth tier—the Bottom Dwellers or Problem States—includes about seventy-five states in varying degrees of political or economic disarray, or both. Their internal messes and conflicts sometimes impel top-tier countries to send in the troops (Afghanistan and Bosnia), sometimes give humanitarian relief (Bangladesh

or Indonesia after natural disasters), and sometimes apply diplomatic pressure to combat human rights violations (Burma and Zimbabwe). They attract large-scale attention from major powers only when they fall apart internally or menace their neighbors. Examples include Sudan, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Nicaragua, and Burma. Many are the scenes of civil wars and ethnic cleansing; these states also harbor terrorists, engage in cross-border violence, and flirt with economic collapse, producing refugees and health issues that have the potential to afflict others. Such states have an international voice and even modest power when their internal woes become so threatening to others as to allow them to lay claims to international resources. Some, like Sierra Leone, which recently concluded a civil war, have required and received outside peacekeeping and economic assistance to prevent a resumption of fighting. Some, like Darfur in Sudan, where the situation is awful, touch Western humanitarian hearts or trigger fears of terrorism, but don't levitate to become more than sad political topics in top-tier countries.

The nations in the last several tiers also extract bits of power from the now widespread practice of multilateral diplomacy where the practice of consensus reigns. In forums like world trade, global warming, and health, they have a voice. That's because the expectation in these multilateral arenas is that every nation should be a player and a signatory. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often help add weight to the views of these bottom-tier countries.

The seventh and final tier consists of the Non-State Actors. They include refugee and human rights advocacy groups (the NGOs), terrorists, the international media, and international business. They are a highly disparate bunch in interests and actions, and they often act in ways contradictory to one another's interests. They are now thoroughly intertwined with governments, societies, and individuals all over the globe and operate worldwide. It's difficult to measure their influence, but they dwell everywhere and usually manage to get at least a hearing on big issues and a real voice where their expertise is engaged.

Many NGOs have long operated within countries, but never approaching their present numbers or influence. Global communications and the Internet magnify their views as well. Perhaps no twenty-first-century business touches the power of the East India Company, but there are now tens of thousands of such companies, small and large. These firms have considerable impact on issues directly affecting them. It would be obscene to list terrorist and extremist groups among the NGOs, but they are, nonetheless, Non-State Actors of critical importance.

To summarize, the distribution of power in the pyramid looks something like this: the United States uniquely has the power to lead, but certainly not to dictate; the second tier, The Eight, can be either the principal partners or definitive blockers of Washington. All other states in the other layers have sharply varying powers to resist or to help or hurt in subordinate roles. And one final point about this pyramid: For all the enormous disparities in influence and the continuing power advantages of the top tiers, the entire system tends toward stasis, inaction, and drawn-out pulling and tugging.

IN OTHER WORDS, THERE are some good reasons behind the erroneous conclusions of the world-is-flat crowd. They rightly highlight a slew of historic shifts that *have* reshaped the distribution and composition of international power—the geographic transfer of power from Europe to Asia, the decline of military power and concomitant rise of economic power, the attendant splintering of power accompanied by a growing interdependence between and among states, and the sprouting of threats from within rather than between states. Their mistake is in taking their conclusion about the leveling process to extreme lengths. This process has empowered many states that were previously insignificant. But by no measure has it eliminated the substantial disparities in power—let alone the centrality—of power itself, and the power of the United States.

The geographic shift of power from Europe to Asia is the most noted of these phenomena. Europe ruled the roost for almost 500

years, militarily and economically. Now, Asia has most of the world's dynamic economies—particularly China, India, and parts of Southeast Asia. And the military capabilities of China and Japan rival or exceed those of the major European countries. Of course, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France have nuclear weapons, but so do China, India, and Pakistan.

Paradoxically, this power shift has tended to magnify America's global power rather than diminish it. That's because as of this writing, Asians have played a less assertive diplomatic role globally than did Europe. The major states of Europe historically exercised their power globally. Even today, with their power greatly dimmed, they still make that effort and merit a seat at most bargaining tables. For the most part, however, Asians have thrown their weight around in Asia, and on economic issues. Generally, China and Japan, the two Asian powers most capable of distant intervention, refrain from involvement in interstate conflicts on other continents and usually take an arm's-length position on the internal politics of faraway states. India has been even more reluctant than Beijing to seek influence in distant conflicts. Moreover, Asian-Pacific groupings are still in their infancy and have less clout than the European Union and its affiliates.

Europe, of course, could weigh in more heavily on future power scales if the ever-expanding European Union were to develop a single defense, economic, and foreign policy. But that goal remains distant. The British and French, in particular, will still insist on their policy independence. In the meantime, European diplomacy leans toward the fluffy and reactive.

In perhaps a decade or more, major Asian states may feel safer on their home fronts and permit themselves the luxury of greater involvement beyond their continent. For now, however, a weaker Europe and a circumspect Asia allow more running room for Washington.

AS THE GEOGRAPHY OF power has shifted, so has its composition. International power now has more of an economic flavor than ever

before and an enhanced diplomatic dimension, as well as a reduced military component. Internal economic strength, to be sure, has always mattered and has formed the basis of almost all external power. But military force had been the principal calling card, while diplomacy has been trained on convening alliances or counter-alliances, and putting the final touches on victories or defeats. Major powers went to war to acquire territory and riches. By contrast, governments mainly limited their economic actions to protecting trade and collecting tributes from their defeated adversaries. Private banks and traders went their own private ways, calling in favors as needed from government. For the most part, empires and nations were not nearly as involved in one another's economies and daily economic lives as they are today. The range of interstate economic transactions has expanded enormously.

Now, national power finds its most common expressions in a state's capacities as a buyer, a seller, a lender, a borrower, an investor, an innovator, and a benefactor. In most countries today the government's role in these activities is substantial. On the whole, however, economic activities are pursued for economic ends, and economic power is used to exact economic concessions. From time to time, of course, and depending on the issue, nations do link economics to strategic and foreign policy aims. The major focus of diplomacy in the twenty-first century will be on economic transactions, while military force will usually wait in the wings.

Most governments allow for a great deal of economic give-and-take with other nations and foreign businesses. They even show some tolerance for setbacks at economic bargaining tables—especially compared with the zero tolerance they have for security disputes. Nations abide one another's economic activities now without resorting to war or military threats. Nations seem to live relatively easily, if not happily, with the interdependencies and the attendant economic ups and downs.

Washington still sits at the center of the world economy, in the varied roles of both leader and mere bargainer, supplier and consumer, the main engine of worldwide economic growth, and the

closest thing there is to a manager of the global economy. It thus has the primary responsibility for managing the global trading and investment systems, and it holds most of the keys to the international economy, through its membership in such entities as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. It is hard to imagine other nations digging their way out of their economic doldrums or even thriving without U.S. support, approval, or leadership.

Oracles of the theory of the decline in U.S. power have disputed these propositions for some time, and did so far more vigorously after America's economic crisis blossomed in 2008. They saw the crisis as proof of the deepening rot in the American economy and argued that the new economies of the world, such as those of China, India, and Brazil, would be insulated from the American financial disasters. They advanced the decoupling argument, namely that these new economies had accumulated such large currency reserves from export profits and had built such strong banking systems as well that they would survive America's credit fiascoes and even thrive relatively. They maintained that the crisis demonstrated that a major shift in world economic power had occurred. But these declinist assertions have been proven to be weak and shaky already:

First, though the American economy was perhaps hardest hit by the 2008 economic earthquakes, the others have not been insulated and have suffered almost as badly. Second, investors from around the world took refuge not in these new currencies, but once again in the dollar. Again, no other economy and no other currency were considered as safe or safer than America's. Third, non-American leaders, new and old, of virtually all nations did not grab the leadership reins to organize global rescue, but as always, they turned to Washington and only to Washington. It was a Bush administration already on its knees politically that stepped out front to coordinate international interest rate cuts. And it was lame duck Bush, not Chinese or Indian or European leaders, who summoned presidents and prime ministers from the world's top twenty economies for an emergency conference in Washington in November 2008. Fourth, and

perhaps most tellingly, the leaders of the newly empowered economies have not been running around demanding that Washington be replaced as the economic leader, let alone claiming this position for themselves. They don't want that responsibility, and they don't have the power or position to carry it out. They know better than America's fashion designers that they cannot fulfill this leadership role. What they want and what they will have is a presence and a voice at every international economic table, commensurate with their new standing.

The financial crisis shook the entire pyramid of power, including America's lonely perch at the very top, and rejiggered the economic balance of power. America counts somewhat less. So do Japan and Western Europe. Several of the new economic giants are much stronger both relatively and absolutely, and count for much more than they used to. But together and separately, none can match America's economic power and position overall, nor replace Washington as the global economic leader. The pyramid still holds, despite the continuing crisis, and America—for all its new woes—remains the world's only economic leader for the foreseeable future.

As military power declines in importance along with its short-term and often decisive effects, and as economic power rises with its longer-term and more complicated results, the overall diplomatic terrain has become highly cluttered, complex, and often stalemated. There seems to be an unprecedented amount of diplomacy on an ever-burgeoning set of agendas—but with very thin results. It seems that the will to make concessions in order to reach agreements has waned. Rather, governments are now inclined to live with disputes and differences and operate on an ad hoc basis. Political leaders are more reluctant to concede unless the compromise is essential to their political position at home. The fair conclusion seems to be that the new distribution of power and its altered composition have slowed down and even knotted up the process of settling differences.

The rise of multilateral diplomacy on top of the traditional bilateral variety has raised additional barriers to successful diplomacy. Between 100 and almost 200 nations now need to be shepherded

toward consensus on all the hot topics, such as trade and health. Nothing in history approaches the current magnitude and complexity of multilateral diplomacy. And like all the other changes in the disposition and composition of power, it slows down the resolution of conflicts.

THE POWER OF THE strong has also been choked by an unprecedented degree of interdependence among states. Economic interdependence is palpable. One telling example is the highly entangled Chinese-American economic relationship: for its economic growth, China depends on exports to America, and America depends on China's use of its profits to purchase U.S. securities to finance those imports. Or take Western dependence on Middle Eastern oil, and the Arab oil producers' need for Western military protection and relatively safe investment opportunities. But the condition of being thoroughly intertwined also shows up in national security as well. Specifically, some of America's most advanced missiles and communications systems have parts manufactured in a dozen different countries, including countries with less than entirely friendly relations with Washington.

This interdependence means that deals take longer and are more difficult to finalize than in decades past. Issues drag on. And contrary to the bright expectations and violin music that usually accompany toasts to globalization, the phenomenon has tended to freeze power relationships and perpetuate the status quo. By contrast, the two great benefits of interdependence are that many countries are becoming richer, and nations aren't killing each other over their disputes.

Looked at solely in power terms, mutual dependence has reinforced the splintering of power. Even small and midsize states have little pieces of the action, if only the power to say no regarding their own affairs. It is this splintering of power that makes the world look flat to the naked eye.

Finally, international power is stretched and thinned by the new

source of the most serious threats to international peace and security. Such threats now spring more from within nations than between them. This makes the threats harder to reach and more difficult to combat. It was easy to chase Saddam's army out of Kuwait. Later, it was relatively easy to defeat the Afghan Taliban on the battlefield and occupy Kabul and beat Saddam's army and occupy Baghdad. The quagmires came later, from insurgencies within Afghanistan and Iraq.

The most worrisome threats now stem far more from terrorists acquiring nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction than from traditional conventional armies. Nations like Iran can lose wars and later strike back with terrorists against the homelands of the victorious states. The United States and Israel can theoretically destroy Iran's nuclear capability and find themselves faced with terrorist attacks on their own soil. Or weak states fall apart and visit their problems on neighbors near and far. Or weaker states such as North Korea can acquire nuclear weapons and change the balance of power with this single act. This is why the acquisition of nuclear weapons, or even the relevant technology, by—say—Iran, is regarded as the contemporary equivalent of an act of aggression. Or a state can collapse and drown its neighbors with refugees and other woes, as often occurs in Africa.

What we've seen is that if leaders of these weak states think that outsiders are trying to dictate or meddle in their internal issues, they dig their heels in even more. Not surprisingly, they define internal issues very broadly—running from how they rule their citizens to their decision to pursue nuclear weapons. It's easier for Washington to get foreign leaders to stop bothering their neighbors than to get them to lighten up on their own people. China will work with Washington on North Korean nuclear weapons, but turns a deaf ear to pleas for human rights and democracy within its borders.

THE PYRAMID OF POWER encompasses all these changes, but the overall effects are far from linear. A final gaze at the pyramid re-

veals two competing crosscurrents: One is the greater splintering of power at mid- and lower tiers, and the other is its increased concentration in the upper tiers. How these crosscurrents are managed by policymakers, particularly those in the United States and The Eight, will be one of the most critical factors in determining where history takes us next.

The first current, the splintering of power, began in earnest after World War II with the multiplication of nation-states and with their new nationalist fervor to resist outside pressures. Experts argue over whether this phenomenon has been good or bad, and the answer seems to depend on where one sits. To those newly empowered, it seems a boon. The major powers can't push them around nearly so readily as before. But to those interested in some semblance of world order, the fractionalization of power is producing a world sinking in deadlocks. It is becoming increasingly difficult to solve problems and resolve conflicts.

This splintering, a phenomenon unprecedented in history and laden with unforeseen consequences, mesmerized policymakers and policy experts. They became so absorbed in what was happening at the middle and lower ends of the power pyramid that they scanted something at least equally potent: the current evolving at the top.

More and more, power was being concentrated in the top three tiers of the pyramid. The paramount power of the United States at the very apex should have been perfectly clear to all. The economic, military, and diplomatic facts demonstrated beyond argument that the United States was the world's sole leader on major problems, yet not a dominant power. But these facts were obscured by what most perceived as the unilateralist rhetoric and actions of President George W. Bush. This unilateralism tended to isolate America, thereby diminishing its power. Under Bush, there was often no lead for nations to follow. President Clinton had not fared a great deal better on the global leadership front, although he was far less unilateralist and isolated than Bush. In any event, neither understood the nature of America's superior power and unique leadership role, and therefore both failed to take advantage of it.

Nor did The Eight in the powerful second tier see the new role they could play, given their new interests and power. They saw they had new power, especially in China, Russia, India, and Brazil. But leaders in Beijing, New Delhi, Moscow, and Brasília did not delude themselves about how their power compared with Washington's. They grasped that their power rivaled America's but did not equal it. Unlike America's flat-worlders, they did not exaggerate their power and overreach. In fact, most underreached and did not stand up for what they themselves saw as their new interests in sustaining world order. They had a much larger stake in world economic affairs, and understood that this required a decent amount of world stability. But of The Eight—China, India, Brazil, Japan, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom—few have been willing to put their power on the line to help others solve problems or to resolve conflicts. The third-tier countries, mainly the oil-rich ones like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, also have not distinguished themselves in these respects. And so we all drifted on and about these last two decades.

Policymakers and analysts have been wallowing in the new and critically important splintering current and not zeroing in nearly enough on the power-concentrating current. The consequence of this misjudgment has been most serious: It has been to reinforce the stalemating effects of the decentralizing current. Since policy leaders seemed unclear and uncertain about how to use their powers to solve the problems, they essentially went along with or gave in to them—and the problems have deepened accordingly. In the last analysis, we have all failed to think creatively about how to productively combine power at the top of the pyramid to get things done.

The power pyramid reveals the stalemate problem we've been living with as well as the policy solution. The solution is to forge cooperation within the top two tiers in particular. The record is quite plain on this.

When Washington and The Eight want to right a dangerous wrong, they can. Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was a threat to world order, and they joined together successfully to chase his troops out.

When they want to tamp down a dangerous common threat, they can. Look at the progress they've made together through cooperation on intelligence and law enforcement operations against terrorists. If they want to combat the threat of nuclear proliferation, they have a good shot. With a united diplomatic front, most of The Eight moved North Korea, one of the most intransigent countries in the world, along a policy path to curb its nuclear program—at least reaching a paper agreement, if only fleeting. On Iran, where they have not been nearly united enough, the dangerous nuclear issue never got nearly as far.

Obviously, there are roadblocks to such cooperation, not least of which are the domestic politics of these major powers and how each perceives its own national interests. And obviously, cooperation sounds nice and is nice, but is often hard and costly to arrange. But the overriding reason for cooperation is clear: It's the only way to solve common problems. And the top-tier nations have the power to succeed if they rethink how to manage their power.

The critical step is for Washington to see this light—to master the power pyramid and rethink how to use power in this new unipolar and multipolar context. It means fashioning a coherent overall strategy, an essential and torturous step our leaders rarely take. It means developing genuine understanding and knowledge of the internal politics of other countries; knowing what we can reasonably ask of our intelligence experts; doing a better job of managing the politics of foreign policy in America; and getting a much better handle on the new forms of military, economic, and foreign policy power. It calls on us to relearn the connection between power and policy. The answers reside in the pyramid, along with the new rules for exercising power.

Part II

Rules for Exercising Power