



# Why Europe Avoided Hegemony: A Historical Perspective on the Balance of Power

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Recent work demonstrates that the European state system—which, since the Middle Ages, saw the recurrent formation of balances of power—constitutes a historical exception rather than the rule among anarchic international systems. In this study, I set out to explain why Europe avoided hegemony. I argue that the character of state–society relations at the time of intensified geopolitical competition leads to different systemwide outcomes with respect to balancing and hegemony. Where multiple privileged groups already exist, rulers must negotiate with a range of societal actors to extract revenue and resources for warfare. This further entrenches institutional constraints on rulers and the privileges enjoyed by societal groups, which in turn make it difficult for rulers to convert conquest into further expansion. In the absence of preexisting multiple privileged groups, however, geopolitical competition instead further weakens the ability of societal actors to check their rulers. This dynamic creates a return-to-scale logic that facilitates systemwide conquest. My argument accounts for the diverging trajectories of, on the one hand, medieval and early modern Europe and, on the other hand, ancient China—where the state of Qin eliminated its rivals and established universal domination.

Why was European power-politics characterized by a sustained balance of power from the Middle Ages onwards? In particular, why did Europe see a series of bids for hegemony founder in the face of antihegemonic balancing (Watson 1992:260; Levy and Thompson 2010:8)? These might seem surprising questions. Balance of power theory remains one of the most important touchstones in security studies and international-relations theory. It predicts that multistate systems will form recurrent rough balancing equilibria that preclude universal domination (Waltz 1979:121; cf. Levy 2004:35; Schweller 2006:4–5; Kaufman, Little and Wohlforth 2007:3; Wohlforth, Little, Kaufman, Kang, Jones, Hui, Eckstein, Deudney and Brenner 2007:155; Nexon 2009a:334, 2009b:10–1). However, a new body of comparative-historical literature demonstrates the unusualness of the European case (Watson 1992:313; Hui 2005; Kaufman et al. 2007; Wohlforth et al. 2007; cf. Nexon 2009a). Most other anarchic international systems gradually succumbed to some sort of hegemony or domination<sup>1</sup>—often in the form of full imperialization—as balancing proved ineffective against the most powerful state in the system (Kaufman et al. 2007).<sup>2</sup>

From a historical perspective, the European experience raises what Wohlforth et al. (2007:156) term a

“foundational question” of international relations: “Whether and under what conditions the competitive behavior of states leads to some sort of equilibrium” (Schweller 2004:161, 2006:11; Nexon 2009a:353–4, 2009b:11; Levy and Thompson 2010:40–1). The literature addressing this question remains in its infancy, but a number of existing explanations provide some possible answers. Levy and Thompson (2005, 2010) argue that balance of power theory only operates within particular scope conditions: autonomous, continental, multistate systems with land-based powers. Hui (2004, 2005) proposes a “dynamic theory” of international politics. According to her, the logic of domination and the logic of balancing compete with one another—but actor-level strategies can tilt the balance toward one outcome or the other. She uses this theory to shed light on the divergent trajectories of ancient China (656–221 BC) and early modern Europe (1495–1815). Kaufman et al. (2007; Wohlforth et al. 2007) review a series of ancient multistate systems that developed from balance toward hegemony. They propose that such developments occur when rulers’ administrative capacity is high and the system’s borders are rigid—that is, when the system does not expand in size (Wohlforth et al. 2007:178–9). Schweller (2004, 2006) argues that “underbalancing”—the failure of states to balance against dangerous accumulation of power—tends to occur in incoherent states with divided elites and low social cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I present an alternative answer to Wohlforth et al.’s “foundational question.” I follow a number of recent scholars in arguing that such an explanation must combine system-level pressures and domestic-level factors (cf. Hui 2004, 2005; Schweller 2006:5; Kaufman et al. 2007; Nexon 2009a:353–4; see also Spruyt 1994; Deudney 2007). However, I offer a more institutionalist account that stresses bottom-up dynamics of resistance

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<sup>1</sup> I use hegemony and domination interchangeably in this article. Empire is the most extreme form of domination. For more detailed distinctions between non-balance outcomes see Watson (1992) and Kaufman et al. (2007).

<sup>2</sup> As Levy and Thompson (2005, 2010) point out, this has implicitly been recognized in the older literature on balance of power as “Europe is the only system for which all balance-of-power theorists agree that great powers have systematically balanced against hegemonic threats” (2005:5; see also 2010:13–4; Levy 2004:38–41).

<sup>3</sup> Theories such as offensive realism and power transition theory also address the issue of the balance of power. But as they make no attempt to explain how an interstate system is replaced by hegemony, I do not consider them as alternative explanations.

against external domination (te Brake 1998; Nexon 2009b). This argument draws inspiration from Machiavelli's (1950 [1532]:15–8) observation in Chapter IV of *The Prince* that, in Europe, the initial conquest of new territories was relatively easy. The fragmentation of the European kingdoms into semi-autonomous sub-units, in conjunction with the presence of privileged and potent estate groups, enabled conquerors to find collaborators in enemy territory.<sup>4</sup> However, consolidation of conquests proved much more difficult. This very fragmentation and political decentralization interfered with organizing and dominating newly won territories. In the Orient, Machiavelli observes, the situation was the exact opposite: conquerors faced united absolutist kingdoms. Yet, if one succeeded in defeating this mighty enemy, the lack of semi-autonomous centers of power facilitated domination (cf. Gellner 1994:81–5).

I develop this argument below. Its assessment requires historical comparisons between different anarchic international systems, including Europe (Levy and Thompson 2005:32; Nexon 2009b:11). The ancient Chinese multistate systems provides the most obvious comparative case (Hui 2001:272–403, 2004:175–205, 2005). The Chinese system, like the later European one, saw repeated attempts to balance against would-be hegemonies (Hui 2005). But the long-term outcome differs from the European: Domination—indeed, by an empire—supplanted balancing equilibria. Furthermore, the Chinese state system provides the *only* well-attested example of a multistate system that developed in virtual isolation from other systems (Watson 1992:22, 85). Thus, the Chinese system represents what Hui (2004, 2005) aptly terms a “counterfactual Europe” and thereby serves as an excellent case for the logic of comparative control.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I explain when and how geopolitical competition produces a sustained balance of power or hegemony/domination. Second, I show that this explanation makes sense of the divergent trajectories of medieval and early modern Europe (approximately 1100–1800 AD) and ancient China (approximately 656–221 BC). I analyze a key episode in European history: the Habsburg drive for hegemony in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD. I then briefly contrast it with the Qin drive for hegemony in the third century BC. I proceed to lay out the implications for competing theories before turning to concluding thoughts.

### The Argument

To account for why the European state system has long sustained a balance of power, we need to incorporate a particular insight from the literature on the relationship between war-making and state formation (Hintze 1975 [1906], 1975 [1931]; Tilly 1975, 1985, 1990; Schumpeter 1991 [1917/1918]; Downing 1992; Ertman 1997; Weber 2003 [1927]). Recent scholarship tends to corroborate this literature's main claim: Geopolitical competition facilitates territorial consolidation and state rationalization. At the same time, it challenges the notion that geopolitical competition, unto itself, also paves the way for political concessions in the form of institutional constraints on leaders. A number of scholars argue that the European trajectory hinges not only on the existence of a

multistate system, but also on the establishment—prior to the processes of state-building—of “a competitive social environment where powerful social groups could balance off rulers' power” (Vu 2010:159; cf. Poggi 1978:36–41; Chirot 1985; Hall 1985; Tilly 1985, 1990; Jones 2008 [1981]; Blaydes and Chaney 2013).

Figure 1 shows how this insight helps account for European balancing equilibria. In brief, geopolitical competition has different—at the extreme, virtually opposite—consequences for the balance of power in an international system. What matters is the character of state–society relations when such geopolitical competition kicks in; geopolitical pressure interacts with state–society relations to produce systemwide balances or domination.

Generalized geopolitical competition provides the trigger in Figure 1. Any multistate system exhibiting a balance of power will involve geopolitical competition, but a fully formed state system—such as that characterizing Europe after the Peace of Westphalia—is not a prerequisite for geopolitical competition. Geopolitical competition merely requires a situation where rulers, due to the intensity of warfare, must mobilize their economies for conflict (cf. Hintze 1975 [1906]; Tilly 1990; Schumpeter 1991 [1917/1918]; Ertman 1997:23–8; Stasavage 2011:9).

The more detailed causal chains—which explain the diverging trajectories of Europe and China (illustrated in Figure 2 below)—operate via the initial intra-unit consequences of the onset of geopolitical competition. In both scenarios, the intensification of geopolitical competition necessitates a mobilization of the economy to prepare for warfare. It also produces a professionalization of the state apparatus, including the military (Hintze 1975 [1906]; Tilly 1975, 1990; Downing 1992; Ertman 1997). If multiple strong societal groups—such as nobility, clergy, and townsmen—exist prior to the intensification of geopolitical pressure (in Figure 1 denoted by “balance” in state–society relations), then the mobilization of the economy and strengthening of state capacity require rulers to bargain extensively with those groups. This process further institutionalizes their privileges and establishes constraints upon rulers—such as charters of liberties and assemblies controlling fiscal matters. This scenario characterized medieval Europe. It constitutes a “bottom-up” model for shoring up military capabilities. Where no such multiplicity of strong societal groups exists prior to the intensification of geopolitical competition (in Figure 1 denoted by “domination” in state–society relations) rulers are instead able to mobilize the economy and strengthen the state in a “top-down” manner. This process may even enable them to remove the hereditary rights enjoyed by nobles. Ancient China underwent precisely this kind of transformation.

The two mobilization approaches therefore entail opposite effects. The former strengthens the centrifugal

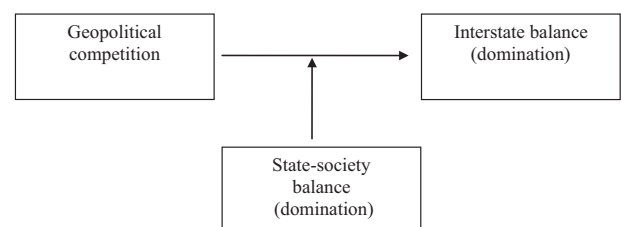


FIG. 1. The Iterative Relationship Between Interstate Relations and State–Society–Relations

<sup>4</sup> For a related argument focusing on colonial expansion, see MacDonald (2014).

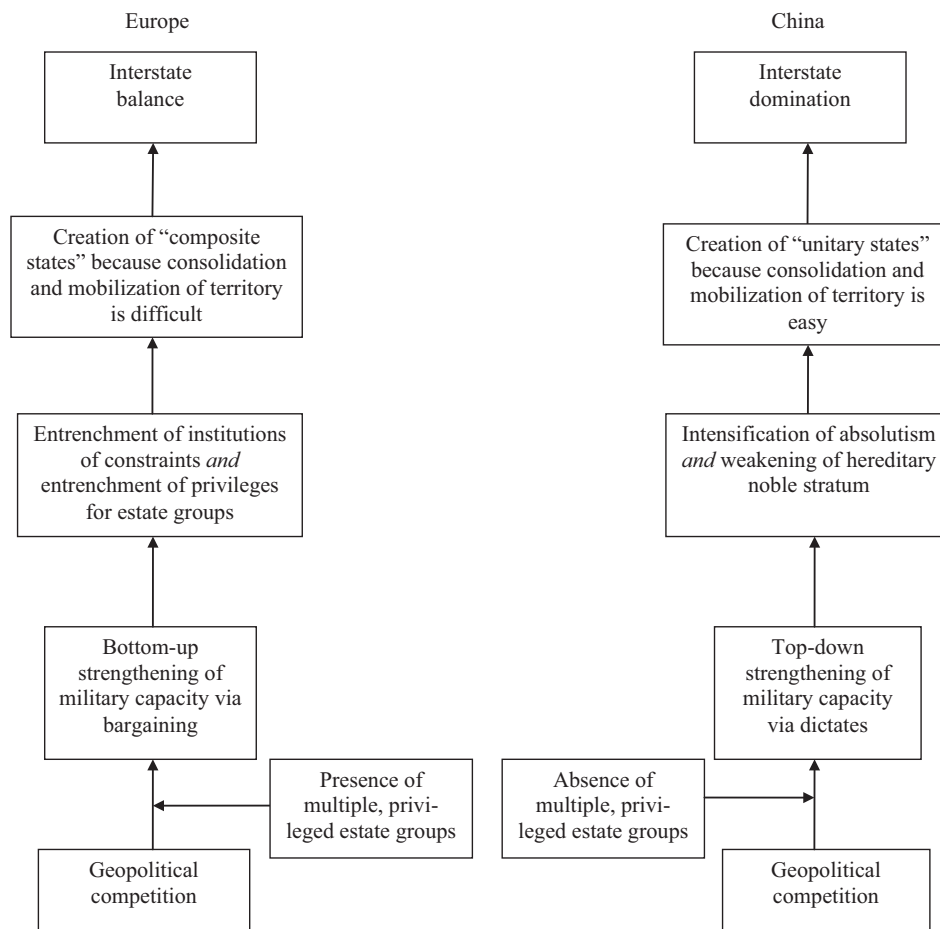


FIG. 2. Contrasting Paths of State Formation and Interstate Relations, Depending on the Presence (Left, Europe) or Absence (Right, China) of Multiple, Privileged Estate Groups

forces of the realm via the creation of multiple centers of political power. The latter strengthens the centripetal forces of the realm via an intensification of absolutism. As Machiavelli (1950 [1532]:15–8) notes, this political divergence shapes interstate relations. In the system composed of units under absolutist rulers, a return-to-scale logic will likely favor a unit that enjoys increasing predominance over its rivals. First, its ruler faces little threat from internal opposition due to the absence of strong internal groups. The ruler enjoys the ability to engage in conquest without triggering effective domestic opposition—including actual rebellion. Second, the domination-seeker can overcome the “loss-of-strength gradient” (Boulding 1962) that often checks systemwide expansion because it is easier to consolidate conquest and apply newly acquired wealth and territory for the purpose of further expansion. The Chinese state of Qin benefited from this process in the third century BC: Its incremental expansion created a larger consolidated “unitary state” where each new subunit—ruled directly by appointed officials—was subordinated to the rule of the center. Such administrative assimilation and economic mobilization were eased by the direct control of the ruler and the absence of organized pockets of societal resistance in newly acquired territories (Hui 2004:194). In other words, under such conditions first-mover advantage is likely to be high because economic and military might increase as territory is added. Third, and as a consequence, even

sustained attempts at balancing tend to prove ineffective once the territorial accumulations of the most dominant state reaches a critical level; systemwide domination—in the form of hegemony or empire—proves a much more likely outcome than a balancing equilibrium.

However, in the context of a societal landscape characterized by constraints on the executive and multiple centers of political power, bids for systemwide domination often falter. First, attempts to strengthen the military capabilities of the state via new taxes and the removal of established privileges (“liberties”) trigger contention from privileged groups in society. This contention may culminate in outright rebellion. Rebellious regional elites might even ally with external enemies to secure their privileges and rights (Schweller 2004:179). Second, in such a system, it will be difficult to overcome the “loss-of-strength gradient” by consolidating conquest and making it pay. Rulers will often need to compensate those societal groups shouldering the costs of conquest with new privileges. They will need to co-opt at least some new elites from annexed territories by guaranteeing their own privileges and rights. For instance, rulers frequently grant or reconfirm exemption from taxation for particular groups, for example, the nobility and clergy. This further exhausts the financial resources available to domination-seekers. Meanwhile, attempts to create central administrative institutions provoke resistance from local elites with an interest in maintaining their “historic” laws and

administrative models. Expansion therefore creates “composite states” in which each sub-unit enjoys particular political, legal, and bureaucratic institutions. Local elites jealously guard these privileges and institutions. To make matters worse for would-be dominators, the territory of the composite states—created by shifting allegiances of regional elites or testamentary succession—will often not make up a consolidated block. This increases logistical barriers for subsequent military interventions. In other words, little or no first-party advantage exists in such a system: The bigger the political unit gets, the more fragmented it becomes, and the more vulnerable it becomes to organized opposition—including outright rebellion. Third, and as a consequence, balancers enjoy significant advantages when seeking to check bids for dominant by even a state controlling outsized territory and wealth—as the Habsburgs learned in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries AD.

The two causal chains illustrated in Figure 2 provide an answer to what Wohlforth et al. (2007:178–9) frame as the pivotal issue of the entire debate about the balance of power: whether “power is cumulative.” In a system made up of political units with strong, privileged societal groups—such as that found in medieval and early modern Europe (1100–1800 AD)—power is inherently fragmented and size is weakness. In a system made up of political units with no such internal constraints—such as Warring States era China (481–221 BC)—power is cumulative and size is strength because it means that more resources can be mobilized for warfare.

### Comparing Europe and China: Dating the Onset of Geopolitical Competition

In ancient China, the onset of geopolitical competition began with the loss of military hegemony by the Zhou kings in the eighth century BC (Hsu 1999:552, 564; Feng 2006). By 656 BC, the system experienced significant geopolitical competition (Hsu 1999; Hui 2005:57), which subsequently intensified in the Warring States period (481–221 BC). Lewis (1999:587–650) describes the last as a multiple-state system forged in warfare (Hsu 1999:545–86). This intense geopolitical competition spurred a large-scale pattern of territorial consolidation. Of the 148 political units that can be documented at some point in the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BC), 128 were swallowed by the dominant states of Qi, Jin, Qin, and Chu (Hsu 1999:567). Such persistent geopolitical competition meant that the warring states repeatedly adopted proven institutions—such as mass infantry armies in place of aristocratic chariot warfare (Hsu 1999:573; Lewis 1999:601, 612–20; Hui 2005:58–65; von Falkenhausen 2006:8).

The early phases of European geopolitical competition traces deep into the Middle Ages. Many argue that medieval political units were not genuine states (Watson 1992:151, fn. 6) and that the European state system must therefore be dated either to the French invasion of Italy in 1494 or to the peace of Westphalia in 1648 (Hui 2004:176, 2005; Levy and Thompson 2005:15). However, what matters with respect to my proposed model is simply that generalized geopolitical competition operates within the context of an anarchic system. In much of western and Central Europe, such competition began sometime between 1100 and 1200 AD. “The late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries proved to be an era of particular political unrest” caused by “war, royal taxation, demands

for military service, [and] disputes over rights of consultation” (Maddicott 2010:106). Hintze (1975 [1931]:346) accordingly notes that a nascent states system emerged around the end of the twelfth century, and Thomas Ertman (1997:25–8) documents the existence of geopolitical competition in large swatches of Western Christendom in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD (Myers 1975:56).<sup>5</sup>

### State–society Relations: Status and Developments

Hui’s (2004, 2005) argument that agential strategies provide the crucial explanation for the divergent trajectories of ancient China and early modern Europe rests on her contention that these two historical cases initially displayed relatively similar state–society relations. Specifically, the argument points to the so-called “Zhou feudalism” of the Western Zhou period (1046–771 BC) as similar to the feudalism that characterized medieval Europe (Hui 2001:396–401, 2004:194, fn. 91, 2005:195–205). Hui’s argument—in line with a large body of classical literature—holds that feudalism brought about a nascent set of constitutional checks on rulers in both ancient China and medieval Europe (Stephenson 1942; Strayer and Coulborn 1956; Strayer 1987 [1956]; Poggi 1991:80). This relationship is premised on the political definition of feudalism conceived by classical sociologist and historians such as Max Weber and Joseph Strayer (Strayer 1987 [1956]; Poggi 1991:80). In particular, Hui bases her identification of Zhou China as an instance of such feudalism on the authority of Creel’s 1970 classic, *The Origins of Statecraft in China* (Creel 1970:196, fn. 143, 32, fn. 10, 319–20).

However, scholars working in the decades after World War II, including Creel, had virtually no access to China (Loewe and Shaughnessy 1999:5; von Falkenhausen 2006:18; Feng 2006). The opening of China in the 1980s produced a massive increase in our knowledge about China’s past—especially based on archaeological excavations. This modern scholarship thoroughly criticizes the characterization of Zhou China as feudal. In a string of works, Feng (2003, 2006, 2008) argues that the older view cannot be sustained in the face of recent archeological and historical research. Feng engages Creel’s accounts to show that no evidence of vassalic contractualism between free men exists for Zhou China, that the regional Zhou states bore little resemblance to medieval European fiefs, and that the stationary army of Zhou kings provided the paramount military force of the realm—meaning that the Zhou kings did not depend on summoning vassal forces for their military might (Feng 2003:123, 128, 138, 2006:110–16, 2008:277–8, 288–90). Other recent scholarship agrees with Feng’s findings (Cook 1997).

It follows that Hui overstates the extent of “feudal/medieval” constitutionalism in ancient China. However, she concedes the existence of a particular difference in state–society relations linked to the feudal legacy

<sup>5</sup> Both systems were furthermore highly integrated politically and culturally, something that eased diffusion of military, political, and economic “technology” (Jones 2008 [1981]:45; Hall 1985:135; Tilly 1990; Lewis 1999:620). In Europe it was the cultural community of Latin Christendom and the ecclesiastical infrastructure of the Catholic Church that worked as the glue tying the system together, and which set it apart from the rest of the world (Hall 1985:110–44). In Ancient China it was the cultural community of the Zhou (or the “Hua Xia”) and the institutional similarity of the Zhou states that produced such an integrated whole (Feng 2006:296)—relatively isolated from so-called *Rong* or *Di* outsiders (Di Cosmo 1999:949)—within which the states system could spur diffusion and adaptation by competitors.



(Hui 2005:202–3). The societies of medieval and early modern Europe and ancient China differ with respect to the institutionalization of political and legal privileges for multiple estate groups (Hintze 1975 [1931]; Poggi 1978:16–59; Sabetti 2004). Even before the onset of geopolitical competition in the twelfth century AD, medieval Europe was characterized by the existence of a multiplicity of privileged estate groups (Finer 1997a:855–1051; Sabetti 2004).

The existence of a church independent of secular rulers and the so-called “free” cities are among the most important features of the European case. The clergy’s corporate privileges became entrenched following the eleventh century Gregorian Revolution (Southern 1970) and the Catholic Church’s attempt to counterbalance secular rulers shored up the constitutional balance between ruler and societal status-groups (Hintze 1975 [1931]:350; Hall 1985; Fukuyama 2011). Free or autonomous cities arose as rulers granted similar immunities to other elite groups (Anderson 1974:422; Hintze 1975 [1931]:342–3; Chirot 1985; Finer 1997a:894–5; Reynolds 1997:164). The free cities became a ubiquitous presence in the core areas of Latin Christendom in the centuries after AD 1000. Most of the free cities achieved institutions for self-governance before 1200, with the rest of them following before 1300 (Stasavage 2013:14–7). The elites of the free cities consistently fought to secure their own judicial privileges and political enfranchisement (Hintze 1975 [1931]:343; Poggi 1978:36–59; Chirot 1985; Spruyt 1994:61–3; Finer 1997a:538–9, 775). Finally, the nobility retained important privileges—which went back at least to the Carolingians and which also saw institutionalization in the late Middle Ages (Strayer 1987 [1956]; Blaydes and Chaney 2013). In all cases, these privileges were further strengthened—often via formal charters of liberties—as rulers sought to secure the wherewithal for war after geopolitical competition intensified (Hintze 1975 [1931]; Schumpeter 1991 [1917/1918]; Ertman 1997:25–8).

Similar privileged estate groups did not exist in Western Zhou China (1046–771 BC) or in the Spring and Autumn Period (771–476 BC). Neither saw an equivalent to the Catholic clergy or the Church as an international organization, nor anything like European-free cities (Elvin 1978). Furthermore, the nobility—the only privileged group to be found in ancient China—differed from its counterpart in medieval Europe (von Falkenhausen 2006; Feng 2006). The Chinese nobility was based on lineages rather than on judicial privileges. The Western Zhou period lacked any signs of contractualism or outright corporate immunities in the relationship between the Zhou king and the ranked elite (Feng 2003, 2006).

China also differs fundamentally from Europe with respect to the development of state–society relations. The Chinese nobility grew in strength during the Western Zhou period (Feng 2006:127), but recent archeological findings show that the difference between ranked elite and commoners blurred during Spring and Autumn China (von Falkenhausen 2006:394–5). Rulers, for their part, strengthened as they developed from the “highest representatives of the ranked elite” to despotic kings (von Falkenhausen 2006:8–9, 326–8, 365–9). By the middle of the fourth century BC, rulers had succeeded in politically marginalizing the nobility as they concentrated power in their own persons (Lewis 1999:602–3). This development was facilitated by warfare. The hereditary nobility found itself swept away by the attempts of rulers to more effectively mobilize the economy for war (Hsu 1999:573; Lewis

1999:97–599, 620–1). Whereas the ranked lineage—many of which were of the royal line—could still mediate with the Zhou king in the Western Zhou period, no such societal balancing persisted into the Warring States period (476–221 BC; von Falkenhausen 2006:8–9).

### Effects on the Regime and the State

Social scientists used to employ terms such as the *Ständestaat*—Polity of Estates—(Hintze 1962 [1929], 1962 [1930]; Myers 1975; Poggi 1978) or medieval constitutionalism (Downing 1992; Hui 2005) to characterize the form of regimes that emerged in medieval Europe. More recent historiography favors the label “composite states” to describe early modern European states—in which sovereignty is fragmented as a result of different regions and different estate groups retaining their historical privileges after having been agglomerated into larger units (te Brake 1998:14–21). The problem with both sets of concepts is that they conflate aspects of the regime and aspects of the state (cf. Ertman 1997:4–10; Mazzuca 2010). I accordingly reserve the term “composite state” (versus “unitary state”) for the latter dimension (the state) and capture the former dimension (the regime) by distinguishing between institutions of constraints on the executive and absolutism (cf. Ertman 1997:6–10).

Separating the two dimensions in this way brings out the fact that Europe, after 1200 AD, embarked on a political pathway (i) centered on representative institutions and political decentralization (cf. Downing 1992; Ertman 1997:19) and (ii) featuring fragmented state apparatuses. Between 1200 and 1500 AD, representative institutions—often representing the privileged groups in historical regions rather than the entire realm—became a ubiquitous phenomenon in all of Latin Christendom (Hintze 1962 [1929], 1962 [1930]; Myers 1975:24; Poggi 1978:36–59; Stasavage 2011). This creation of multiple political centers was mirrored in the creation of composite-state apparatuses. Each unit of Latin Christendom contained a number of distinct, locally administered sub-units. This meant that little state infrastructure existed at the central level (across the sub-units). The territorial consolidation identified by Tilly (1975:15)—which saw about 500 political units around the year 1500 transformed to 25 by 1900—thus produced composite units rather than politically uniform territorial states, at least until the modern period.<sup>6</sup>

No such representative institutions, and no composite states, arose in ancient China (cf. Hintze 1975 [1931]; Hui 2001:396–401, 2005:195–6). Instead, the absolutism that already characterized the Chinese states at the beginning of the Warring States period became entrenched (Hui 2005; von Falkenhausen 2006:8–9, 326–8, 365–9) and state apparatuses became more unitary (Lewis 1999; Hui 2005). As discussed above, this happened both in terms of strengthening the centripetal powers of the rulers, and by strengthening the rulers vis-à-vis the nobility—the only other strong force in ancient Chinese society (Lewis 1999:597). Office holding changed from a hereditary right among nobles to an extension of royal power, a factor of vital importance in the “[t]ransformation of the Zhou world into a group of competing territorial states” (Lewis 1999:603–4, 611). As a consequence of the weakening of the ranked elite, the only centers of power that

<sup>6</sup> And in many respects much later. As recently as after World War I, three European empires were subdivided into their composite units.

remained by the fourth and third century BC were just under a dozen absolute kings—each ruling their own bureaucratic state-machine (Table 1).<sup>7</sup>

### Effects on Interstate Relations

The repercussions of this development were felt at the interstate level. In the period 656–256 BC, China experienced relatively stable interstate balancing. But geopolitical competition, including in terms of the scale of warfare, was much more intense than in Europe. Chinese rulers absorbed conquered territory directly into the state in the form of administrative units administered by a state official (Lewis 1999:614–5). All of the states of the Chinese system had developed “relatively coherent administrative and coercive apparatuses;” newly acquired territories lacked organized societal groups that required political co-optation (Hui 2004:194, 2005:97–8). This created a return-to-scale logic that further strengthened expanding great powers. We should not, of course, exaggerate the speed of this process. Strong adversaries and interstate balancing mechanisms countered expansion. The prevailing pattern therefore remained one of piecemeal conquest until the early third century BC (Lewis 1999; Hui 2005). But these piecemeal conquests proved relatively easy to assimilate. The surviving units became stronger and stronger. Already in the fourth century BC, the few remaining states had become capable of fielding massive armies—the potential size of which further increased as they added new territory to their realms (Lewis 1999:627–8).

European rulers, strapped in dense bonds of reciprocity, could not act in the same fashion as their less constrained Chinese counterparts. The English case illustrates this dynamic nicely. Historians have documented how elites in the English Parliament repeatedly put obstacles in the way of the foreign-policy adventures of the Norman and Angevin kings (Maddicott 2010: chapter 3–5). Indeed, the convocation of the most famous English Parliament—Simon de Montfort’s Long Parliament in 1265—resulted from just such a struggle. The conflict arose over King Henry III’s attempt to secure the Sicilian throne for his second son, Edmund. The English barons resented the financial expenditures required for this policy. Led by Simon de Montfort, they rebelled. On May 14, 1264 the rebel army defeated the royal army at the battle of Lewes. De Montfort seized the king and crown prince. The Long Parliament was convoked against this backdrop. This put an end to Henry III’s aggressive dynastic foreign policy (Maddicott 2010:157–276).

More generally, as te Brake (1998) shows, the fragmented sovereignty of the nascent states enabled popular mobilization to influence state formation and regime change (Nexon 2009b). According to te Brake, rulers’ manifold attempts to mobilize money and manpower for warfare triggered political contention. Te Brake (1998:168) shows, through a series of examples from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, how attempts of “territorial consolidation of princely power” repeatedly sparked rebellions. The Comuneros Revolt in Castile in 1520, the numerous revolts in Germany and Switzerland following the Reformation, the protracted Dutch Revolt between 1566 and 1648, the fratricidal French civil wars between 1562 and 1598, followed by the Fronde in 1648–

TABLE 1. Contrasting Ancient China and Medieval and Early Modern Europe

	<i>China</i>	<i>Europe</i>
Geopolitical competition	656–221 BC	Twelfth century AD onwards
State–society relations	Ranked nobility based on lineages Nobility gradually swept away by centripetal reforms	Multiple judicially privileged groups (nobility, clergy, and townsmen) Privileges of estate groups entrenched via charters of liberties
Regime change	Intensification of absolutism in fourth and third century BC	Advent and entrenchment of representative institutions after 1200 AD
State formation	Advent of consolidated, unitary states	Advent of fragmented, composite states

1653, the revolts in Catalonia (1640–1652), Portugal (1640–1668), Naples (1647–1648), and finally the Puritan Revolution in England (1642–1660) all fit this pattern. These revolts normally led to political concessions, often in the guise of a recognition of historic “privileges/liberties” of estates or regions.

The possibility of shifting allegiance to other rulers gave regional elites a crucial bargaining chip against the expansion of princely power and prerogatives (te Brake 1998:168). Meanwhile, even successful territorial expansion sometimes weakened rulers’ control over their other territories, as they had to compensate those elites that supported expansion (te Brake 1998:180). Most importantly, however, was the fact that wholesale territorial takeover seldom occurred as the consequence of conquest. A striking feature of European development is that states were more often created by testamentary succession—especially linked to marriage. This was in complete contrast to Asia, where such territorial expansion only occurred through “wars of conquest and subjection” (Finer 1997b:1269). The European model entailed guaranteeing the rights of privileged groups who rulers normally consulted—via their representative institutions—when succession was settled (Koenigsberger 1971:90). Hence, in medieval and early modern Europe, territorial expansion tended to create “composite states” of the kind I discussed earlier; the administrative, fiscal, and militarily centralization of territorial agglomerations belong to a later period. This increased the loss-of-strength gradient; composite states often consisted of distant territories, which exacerbated the two main problems of military intervention in the early modern period: the distances involved and the cost (Parker 1972:21). These factors eased the success of balancing against would-be hegemons—as the Habsburg example below shows.

### Analyzing a Key Episode: The Habsburg Drive for Hegemony

Scholars point to the hegemonic aspirations of the Habsburgs under Emperor Charles V and his son, Philip II of Spain, as the most important bids to establish hegemonic rule over the European state system before the Napoleonic wars (Watson 1992:169–82): a *monarchia universalis* in the language of (learned) contemporaries

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Feng for suggesting this observation and formulation.

(Koeningsberger 1971:xi–xii). The realm of Charles V emerged through testamentary succession. Charles inherited most of the Low Countries; Franche-Comte; the Castilian and Aragonese thrones, including the Aragonese possessions in southern Italy; the Habsburg lands in and around Austria; and the thrones of Bohemia and Hungary. He quickly added Lombardy and some additional territory in the Low Countries. Charles thus presided over an empire that amounted to about half of the European system of his day (Parker 1996 [1988]:162). Moreover, Charles V, and later Philip II, commanded the most formidable fighting force of the age, the so-called Spanish *tercios*, which for a century—between the victory at Mühlberg in 1547 and the defeat at Rocroi in 1643—enjoyed a reputation for virtual invincibility (Koeningsberger 1971:259; Parker 1972:3–4). If the obstacles to domination illustrated in Figure 2 explain anything, they should help account for the failure of the Habsburg bid for dominance over Latin Christendom.

Charles, from the very outset of his career faced internal opposition from estate groups in Spain, Germany, Italy, and the Low Countries (Koeningsberger 1971:27; te Brake 1998:30; Nexon 2009b:135). The first important uprising occurred on the eve of Charles' ascent as King of the Romans (the electoral position that often served as precursor to papal coronation as Holy Roman Emperor). Charles succeeded to the Castilian and Aragonese thrones (as Carlos I) in 1516 and he actively used his Spanish possessions to further his dynastic ambitions in Germany (Nexon 2009b:141). These efforts paid off when he became King of the Romans in 1519 (and Holy Roman Emperor a decade later). However, the Castilian cities accused Charles of breaking his contractual obligations as King of Castile by pursuing external dynastic ambitions of his own (Koeningsberger 1971:33–6; Nexon 2009b:141–2). In 1520, a few weeks after Charles left Spain to assume his new throne in Germany, the “apparently boundless fiscal demands of their young monarch” sparked the so-called *Comuneros* Revolt in Castile. Eighteen Castilian cities came together to create the Sacred League (*Sancta Junta*). The League sought not only the abolishment of certain taxes, but also to limit the power of the king by strengthening the Cortes (te Brake 1998:26–7; see also Nexon 2009b:146–7). The Castilian nobility defeated the *Comuneros* in 1521, but Charles had to concede to several of their demands, including tax reform. Also, Charles had to reward the Castilian nobility by granting them exemption from taxation (Nexon 2009b:148).

More generally, throughout his momentous reign, Charles was never able to successfully mobilize his widely scattered patrimony for sustained warfare; he constantly met resistance from particularistic forces, especially in Germany (Koeningsberger 1971; Nexon 2009b:135–84). The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was a patchwork of fragmented sovereignty. Around 1500, we thus find 80 imperial “free” cities and more than 2,000 territorial cities, chartered by lords and princes (te Brake 1998:35–6). Virtually all attempts to create all-imperial institutions—such as offices of Grand Chancellor and Treasurer General—soon faltered on the opposition from regional elites (Koeningsberger 1971:14–5, 54). Even after his victory against the Schmalkaldic League at Mühlberg in 1547, both Catholic and Protestant princes of the Holy Roman Empire proved unwilling to increase the emperor's constitutional powers; Charles was too weak to force their hands, in large part because of his

dependence on their continued support (Koeningsberger 1971:57–8).

Charles's son and successor, Philip II of Spain, inherited the hegemonic mantle of his father. But he met similar resistance and faced similar difficulties in forcing through reforms strengthening the administrative powers of the center (Koeningsberger 1971:71–2, 103; Nexon 2009b:185–7). The most important internal resistance against Philip was the protracted Dutch Revolt, which began in the mid-1560s and lasted for 80 years (Nexon 2009b:233–4). The revolt was infused with religious contention between Protestants and Catholics. However, what made the revolt possible—and provided a breeding ground for the Reformation—was the existence of self-governing enclaves scattered over the Low Countries (Parker 1988:66; te Brake 1998:77–8). The rebels continuously rallied against the perceived attempt of Philip II and his local agents to diminish the autonomy of and transgress customary rights in the Low Countries, in particular to raise new taxes for warfare (Koeningsberger 1971:134; Parker 1976:59–61; Nexon 2009b:198, 211, 225).

The political elites of the Low Countries had two main demands: that the provinces should retain control of their own affairs and that the traditional ruling class should be regularly consulted (Parker 1988:66–8). Philip wanted to grant neither demand. After suppressing the initial revolt in 1567, Philip's general and governor in the Low Countries, the Duke of Alva, attempted to increase the central government's power and to secure funds for his army (Koeningsberger 1971:130). Alva did succeed in substantially increasing the taxes paid in the Netherlands—from 750,000 ducats in 1566–1567 to 4.4 million ducats in 1570–1571 (Parker 1972:232–3, 287; Parker 1988:97). However, his efforts triggered renewed opposition; the affluent Low Countries that had been Charles V's greatest economic asset (Koeningsberger 1971:60) quickly became Philip II's major financial liability (Koeningsberger 1971:133; Parker 1972).

The composite nature of Philip's holdings meant that huge distances had to be covered to supply the Spanish *tercios* in Flanders—via the “Spanish Road” from Lombardy (Parker 1972). Philip increased taxation to unsustainable levels in Castile and in his Italian possessions in order finance his Dutch wars (Parker 1988:178–9). This sparked “parliamentary opposition” against taxes in these territories (Parker 1988:183–5), including revolt in Aragon in 1591 (Koeningsberger 1971:94; Parker 1988:187). Meanwhile, the Dutch rebels repeatedly allied with Valois France, Tudor England, and protestant princes in Northern Europe, further forcing Philip to step up his military powers (Koeningsberger 1971). In 1596, Philip II's government went bankrupt for the third time. This enabled the Northern part of the Low Countries—what was to become the Netherlands—to break away from Habsburg Spain. But even in the southern part, which Philip II succeeded in pacifying, the revolt strengthened centrifugal dynamics by forcing Philip to guarantee the Walloon nobility their traditional political prerogatives in exchange for accepting Spanish rule and a Catholic monopoly on worship (Koeningsberger 1971:144; te Brake 1998:105).

We find similar dynamics during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) where the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs made another concerted grab for European hegemony. Philip II's grandson, Philip IV, and his chief minister, Duke Olivares, attempted to strengthen the fiscal and



military demands of the Spanish Habsburgs on hitherto semi-autonomous regions such as Catalonia, Portugal, and southern Italy. This sparked a series of revolts in which the privileged estate groups fought for their traditional liberties. In the case of Catalonia, they even played one dynastic ruler off another by striking an alliance with France (Koeningsberger 1971:257–60; Parker 1972:260; te Brake 1998:121–37; Nexon 2009b:271–2). When Catalonia was reconquered by Spain in 1652, it received back all its liberties (Koeningsberger 1971:257), underscoring that conquest did not present an easy way to rid rulers of such limitations on executive power. But the most vivid illustration of Machiavelli's insight about the pattern of conquest in Europe cuts across the periods of Philip II and Philip IV. One of Philip II's greatest triumphs came in 1580 when he won the Portuguese crown after the succession crisis sparked by the death of King Sebastian I in the Battle of Ksar El Kebir in 1578. Philip first tried to obtain the crown legally through the Portuguese Cortes. When this failed due to opposition from the Portuguese third estate, he sent Alva at the head of an army (Parker 1988:132–43). The Portuguese elites were torn between pro- and anti-Philip factions, and this undermined their ability to resist incorporation (Koeningsberger 1971:89–90). However, even after this victory, Philip guaranteed all Portuguese laws and privileges to achieve formal recognition from the Portuguese Cortes; the Portuguese colonial empire remained a separate empire under the crown. This status allowed Portugal to successfully reclaim its liberty (and hold on to its colonies) in 1640 after launching one of the aforementioned rebellions against Philip IV (Koeningsberger 1971:257–60).

The Habsburg attempts to dominate Europe thus foundered on a combination of interstate balancing and internal opposition. There is little doubt that interstate balancing played a necessary role in stemming the Habsburg tide. First Valois France, then Tudor England, and then Bourbon France allied with Protestant powers in Germany, the Low Countries, and Scandinavia, as well as the Ottoman Turks, to counter Habsburg power (Koeningsberger 1971; Parker 1972, 1988). However, under Charles V, the Habsburgs ruled as large a part of the European system as Qin did of Chinese system in the third century BC (see below)—yet balancing against Qin proved ineffective. It was the inability of Charles V, in particular, but also of his successors more generally, to systematically organize and mobilize Habsburg possessions for warfare that made it impossible to leverage massive holdings into systemic conquest. In this way, strong societal groups in Europe worked to avoid an imperial outcome that would have demanded the levying of new taxes and the infringement of corporate immunities (te Brake 1998:177). As Nexon (2009b:271) aptly notes, the eventual weakness of the hegemonic aspirations of both Bourbon France and Habsburg Spain “stemmed from their composite-state structures and their consequent problems in extracting and mobilizing resources for warfare.”

The Habsburgs Empire under Charles V and Philip II were particularly fragmented—both in political terms and with respect to their state apparatuses. However, they differed mainly in degree from the arrangements found in the other political units of medieval and early modern Europe. Throughout this period, European states involved extremely porous and shifting borders, as historical regions with their own representative institutions, legal frameworks, and rudimentary administrations oscillated from unit to unit. Huge tracts of territories—sometimes

situated far beyond the borders of the states in question—could be quickly gained or lost, often not as a consequence of warfare but due to the shifting allegiances of local elites or a ruling lineage's failure to produce heirs.

Unfortunately, a similarly detailed analysis of the key Chinese episode—the Qin drive for hegemony between 356 and 221 BC (Hui 2004)—is precluded by the lower quality of available historical evidence.<sup>8</sup> However, the data available for this 135-year period (Lewis 1999; Hui 2005) involve precious little evidence that the Qin rulers encountered organized resistance from below against its aggressive foreign policy—either from within its old core territories or from within annexed provinces. Even the devastating defeat of two Qin armies by Zhao's general Lian Po in 269 BC produced no serious rebellions at home. Instead, and rather tellingly, it led to a revolution only in the court of the Qin as the king changed advisers and shifted policies (Lewis 1999:639). More generally, while we find ample evidence of civil wars ravaging the nascent states in the Spring and Autumn period—often triggered by the death of a ruler—these seem to all but disappear as autocracy and unitary states became entrenched in the latter part of the Warring States Period (Hsu 1999:568; Lewis 1999:598; Hui 2005:206).<sup>9</sup>

The first century of Qin expansion involved piecemeal conquest. By 300 BC, Qin created a consolidated territorial block (Lewis 1999:635). In this entire process, Qin rulers used the earlier blueprints developed in Warring States China to assimilate conquered areas. These entered the realm as administrative districts governed by officials, from which Qin extracted military service and taxes (Hui 2005:97–8). After 284 BC, Qin was clearly the most formidable state in the system. After 256 BC, it ruled “more than half the territory of the system” (Hui 2005:99). At this point—and in contrast to Charles V's Habsburg empire of similar proportions—it had become impossible to balance against Qin because its entire territory could be leveraged for protracted warfare (Lewis 1999; Hui 2005). When Qin launched the final wars of unification in 236 BC, it abandoned its prior piecemeal approach and instead swept through the remaining warring states (Hui 2005:100). The result was the establishment of systemwide empire that, with some important but temporary interruptions, became the mainstay of Chinese history.

### Implications for Balance of Power Theory

As Hui (2004:176) observes, it is beyond the capacity of a single author—and the confines of a single article—to systematically study all relevant historical episodes of international systems. Further research should scrutinize how the explanation proposed here fits other international systems, such as those described by Watson (1992) and Kaufman et al. (2007).<sup>10</sup> In-depth study might well

<sup>8</sup> Much of what we know is based on archeological findings, inscriptions on a few cast bronze vessels, and much later Chinese sources (von Falkenhansen 2006; Feng 2006).

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Rasmus Barndorff for bringing this observation to my attention.

<sup>10</sup> Notice, in this connection, that internal fragmentation—particularly due to the existence of a strong Brahmin caste—has also characterized the political units of India (Mann 1986: chapter 11), at least until the Mughal conquest. This might go a long way towards explaining the puzzling fact that the Indian subcontinent has, with the short-lived exception of the empire of Ashoka, not seen the formation of an indigenous empire. But this is merely a tentative hypothesis which can be made on the basis of this article's arguments about the causes of balance and hegemony, respectively.



reveal that other factors, too, played an important role in making international systems equilibrate on balance or hegemony. Nonetheless, the account outlined here provides a strong explanation for the diverging European and Chinese trajectories—arguably the two most important cases of multiple-state international systems in world history. What are the implications for theories about the balance of power?

First, balance of powers realists pose the wrong question. For them, it is almost a natural law that “sustained hegemonies rarely if ever arise in multistate systems” (Levy 2004:35; cf. Waltz 1979, 1997; Schweller 2006:4–5; Kaufman et al. 2007:3; Nexon 2009b:10–1). However, from a historical perspective, the puzzle is not why balancing outcomes sometimes *fail* to occur, but rather why they occur at all. Waltz (1997:915) underlines that structural realism holds merely that “international-political systems tend strongly *toward* balance.” However, what we see in ancient China—and in a string of other premodern international systems (Watson 1992; Kaufman et al. 2007)—is not merely that the system is seldom in balance but that hegemonic aspirations, often in the guise of empire, completely roll over the systems (Watson 1992; Kaufman et al. 2007). The preceding analysis implies that the structure of an international system cannot, in and of itself, generate lasting balances of power; only under certain conditions *internal* to its units is an international system likely to equilibrate on balancing. In a nutshell, the concatenation of interstate and state–society balancing explains the European outcome.

Second, my explanation fails to directly address Levy and Thompson’s (2005, 2010; see also Levy 2004:41–4) claim that global maritime systems are unlikely to produce a balance of power, nor does it necessarily contradict their more detailed claim regarding states against which balancing occurs in autonomous, land-based systems. However, it does question their expectation that “our hypotheses are valid in other autonomous continental systems” (2005:32). To be sure, these other systems might—as was the Chinese for centuries—be characterized by ongoing attempts to balance hegemonic threats. But only in Europe did this produce *sustained* interstate balance. The findings presented in this article imply that even when balancing repeatedly occurs, it will be less effective and less likely to equilibrate in autonomous, land-based, continental systems with unbalanced state–society relations. The evidence and arguments presented in this article thus support Levy and Thompson’s (2005, 2010) caveat that Europe is a “most-likely case” for their analysis and, thus, that the study of Europe provides little “leverage for generalizing to other systems” (2005:32).

Third, at first sight, the arguments presented here seem to contradict Schweller’s (2004, 2006) theory of underbalancing. Schweller proposes that the more state–society relations fit the model of a unitary actor, the more plausible is the realist view of international relations (Schweller 2006:11). Underbalancing tends to occur when states are “incoherent” as divisions within society are likely to, first, make part of the community “actively collaborate with the enemy or remain passive rather than resist the aggressor,” and second, resist military mobilization against the threat from the outside (Schweller 2004:179). However, as other scholars note (Levy 2004), we need to distinguish between balancing as behavior and balance as outcome. While social divisions might well produce underbalancing in a single state, the European case shows that this is likely to hamper domination within

the system when such fragmentation characterizes most of the states.<sup>11</sup>

Fourth, while the analysis presented in this study corroborates a number of Hui’s (2004, 2005) more specific mechanisms of domination and balancing, I argue that European and Chinese state–society relations differed at the outset and that this created path-dependent patterns of constraints on conquest and uninhibited conquest, respectively. This critique of Hui rests on a reinterpretation of Chinese state–society relations, anchored in new evidence that suggests a lack of convergence between ancient Chinese and early modern European state–society relations. Differences in initial conditions, rather than the relatively unconstrained strategic choices of rulers, account for divergent outcomes between the two systems. Virtually all of the self-weakening reforms Hui (2004:194f) identifies in Europe—military reliance on mercenaries and “auxiliaries,” fiscal reliance on intermediate resource-holders, contractual laws governing aspects of warfare and state formation—are arguably endogenous to prevailing state–society relations.

Fifth, my findings lend some support to Kaufman et al.’s (2007) argument that low administrative capacity within units facilitates ongoing balance of power equilibria. My explanation supports the premise that hegemony proves more likely when “power is cumulative” (Wohlforth et al. 2007:178–9). However, I part ways with Kaufman et al. (2007) in adopting a bottom-up institutionalist perspective. It is thus less the administrative reforms of rulers—top-down agential strategies—that matter than the structure of state–society relations when geopolitical competition kicks in. I therefore explain variation that this line of argument treats as contingent.

Finally, I should clarify a few matters that touch upon two cognate bodies of theory about warfare and state formation. First, I do not argue that unconstrained rulers are better at financing and waging war than rulers checked by countervailing institutions. Empirical research supports the opposite conclusion: Constrained rulers have historically proved superior at raising taxes (Schumpeter 1991 [1917/1918]), using public deficit finance (Ertman 1997), and waging war (Doyle 1986:1155; Reiter and Stam 2002) than their more despotic counterparts. Rather, dynamics within each of the two multistate systems are likely to differ in systematic ways—as a consequence of the extent to which aggressive warfare triggers internal opposition and with respect to the possibility of consolidating conquest.

Second, after the so-called military revolution 1550–1650 (Parker 1996 [1988]), a number of European polities became absolutist (Downing 1992; Ertman 1997). How does this development fit with my argument? In Latin Christendom, absolutism never came close to the ideal described by its theorists. What Finer terms “intermediary institutions” (of medieval origin)—such as the French parlements, regional estates, and corporations in general—survived in the European wave of absolutist monarchy (Finer 1997b:1298–1303–7, 1455; te Brake 1998:178). Constraints on the executive remained much

<sup>11</sup> This suggests a caveat to the explanation illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. An external actor not characterized by internal constraints might be able to roll up the system, as the Macedon monarchy did with the state system of ancient Greece and as many other “marcher” states have done throughout history (Mann 1986). A system maintaining a balance of power thus probably needs to be relatively “autonomous,” that is, shielded from external actors playing a different game (Levy and Thompson 2005, 2010).

stronger in countries where representative government survived *in toto*, such as Great Britain and Sweden (Ertman 1997). But political fragmentation was also present in instances of absolutism—even in *Ancien Régime* France and the Prussia of the Hohenzollerns (Koenigsberger 1971:280). Indeed, where the monarchy eventually gained in political power at the expense of the estates, it normally did so “at the price of confirming and respecting many of their privileges, such as the exemption of nobles from taxation [and] the special position of churchmen in society” (Myers 1975:22–3). In sum, prior state–society developments meant that all constituent units of the European state system remained—to a greater or lesser extent—characterized by institutions constraining the executive and privileges for estate groups, even under absolutism.

### Conclusions

This article makes a strong case that consequences of geopolitical competition—both for intrastate politics and for interstate relations—follow from the intersection of interstate and state–society dynamics. In both Europe and China, geopolitical competition served as the trigger for secular political change within the units of the state system. But its effects were conditioned by prior characteristics of state–society relations. Following this interactive logic, geopolitical competition can have completely opposite intra-unit effects. When a multiplicity of organized societal groups exist, geopolitical competition can produce—or further institutionalize—constraints on rulers and entrench existing privileges. When societies lack such organized societal interests, geopolitical competition intensifies absolutism and removes any such privileges. This internal outcome has consequences at the interstate level, as a societal landscape characterized by constraints on rulers hampers attempts at interstate domination. Specifically, repeated push-back from potent societal groups, and the inability to make conquest pay by consolidating new territories, checks the ambitions of domination-seekers. Historically, this created a systemic pattern of cumulative territorial conquest in ancient China and the absence of such a pattern in medieval and early modern Europe. As Machiavelli (1950:17–8) noted almost 500 years ago, this contrast between Europe and Asia “was not caused by the greater or lesser ability of the conqueror, but depended on the dissimilarity of the conditions.”

My argument tracks with recent attempts to recover the “liberal” and “republican” dimensions of balance of power theory (Boucoyannis 2007; Deudney 2007). It also cautions against attempts to restrict balance of power dynamics to modern nation states (Nexon 2009a:350). The very fragmentation of medieval and early modern European politics made for interstate balances. However, the underlying logic of my findings suggests that the contemporary international system will more likely see sustained balances of power than successful bids for large-scale domination.

The political accountability and strong civil societies of present-day democracies could thus plausibly trigger some of the same mechanisms as those identified in medieval and early modern Europe. Needless to say, the medieval and early modern European states were not democracies. But strong groups in today’s civil societies might create functional equivalents of the push-backs against domination identified in medieval and early modern Europe. A system composed of multiple liberal and democratic

states should prove more difficult to dominate—and hence more prone to balance of power outcomes at the systemic level. If so, much depends on the future distribution of political forms in world politics. At the very least, current efforts to untangle the contemporary relationship between military mobilization and regime type should help us to understand not simply the internal dynamics of states, but the ability of the contemporary international system to resist future bids for domination.

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