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GULLIVER'S TROUBLES: GREAT POWERS AND FAILED STATES

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In the famous story by Jonathan Swift, Gulliver was troubled both by the tiny Lilliputians, men “not six inches high,” and by the giant Brobdingnagians, who were 72 feet tall and took “about ten yards at every stride.”

The United States is also fearful of Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians—but we’re talking about countries rather than people. The Lilliputian countries are too weak. They’re failed states, plagued by civil wars and ineffective governments, which breed terrorism, cause humanitarian crises, and export crime and drugs. Meanwhile, the Brobdingnagian countries are too strong. They’re great powers capable of militarily challenging the United States, and dominating Europe or Asia.

Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians have been the major threats to American security since the Republic was founded. But rarely has the United States worried about both in equal measure. Instead, over the last century, the United States has switched back and forth, fearing one and then the other.

In July 1915, the President of Haiti, Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, was cowering in the bathroom at the French legation in Port-au-Prince when the mob arrived. Led by men dressed in black funeral frocks, who had just buried their children, murdered by the regime, the crowd hauled Sam from the bathroom, dragged him through the streets, and cut him to pieces with machetes. The grisly spectacle followed seven years of near-anarchy in Haiti, and prompted the United States to intervene and try to stabilize the country.

As the Haitian case illustrates, during the early twentieth century, the U.S. military spent most of its time dealing with Lilliputians—or Caribbean and Latin American states that were seen as too weak. In his 1904 corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, Theodore Roosevelt declared Washington’s right to intervene in chaos-ridden countries in the hemisphere. In the following decades, there were over two-dozen American nation-building missions known as the “banana wars.”

These operations followed a similar pattern. Fraudulent elections and the specter of civil war prompted the United States to send in the Marines. As Washington saw it, a stable, secure, and democratic region would promote U.S. interests and values, protect the Panama Canal, and expunge foreign—especially European—influence. The aim, as Woodrow Wilson paternalistically put it, was to “teach the South American Republics to elect good men.”¹

¹ Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 131.

By the end of the 1930s, however, the United States shifted its attention dramatically from Lilliputians to Brobdingnagians. The chief threat now emanated, not from countries that were too weak, but from countries that were too strong. For half a century, Washington's spotlight focused on great power rivals, including Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. These states threatened to become regional hegemony that could imperil American interests and directly endanger the homeland. The Franklin Roosevelt administration responded by aiding Britain and other allies through Lend Lease, and after Pearl Harbor, by waging war against the fascist states. From the late-1940s, Washington pursued a strategy of global containment against the Soviet Union.

After the Cold War ended, the pendulum swung again, and the United States moved into another Lilliputian era. On December 8, 1992, U.S. naval commandos slipped ashore as an advance guard for the humanitarian intervention in Somalia. But a small army was waiting for them on the beach, employing bright lights that blinded the commandos. Fortunately, it was an army of journalists and cameramen. In a bid to win the public relations battle in Somalia, officials had tipped off the press. The result was a cross between Omaha Beach and Oscar night.

The U.S. intervention in Somalia symbolized the renewed attention paid to failed states in the 1990s. With the end of the Cold War, there was a decrease in civil wars in Latin America and Southeast Asia, but a spike in violence in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Balkans. The character of civil conflict evolved from organized insurgencies to "primitive wars" with poorly armed militias. Countries that were too weak could provoke humanitarian emergencies, spark refugee flows, and destabilize entire regions.

During Bill Clinton's presidency, every major U.S. intervention targeted failed or failing states. In 1994, U.S. forces entered Haiti to restore an elected government. The following year, American troops joined a peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. And in 1999, the United States intervened to end the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo.

The view of failed states as the primary security threat reached its apogee during the George W. Bush administration. The architects of 9/11 were based in one of the world's most anarchical countries, Afghanistan. The 2002 National Security Strategy stated that, "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones."² In 2004, Francis Fukuyama wrote: "radical Islamist terrorism combined with the availability of weapons of mass destruction added a major security dimension to the burden of problems created by weak governance."³

Why does the pendulum swing back and forth between Lilliputian and Brobdingnagian eras? There are always unique factors at work in each period shaping threat perceptions, such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which starkly reinforced the view that failed states were the primary danger to the United States.

But there are also some underlying dynamics. Most importantly, the emergence of great power rivals tends to blot out the sun, and draw U.S. attention away from failed states. The danger from Lilliputians is overshadowed when Brobdingnagians appear on the horizon. After the great power threat diminishes, the light shines through, revealing the hazard posed by weak countries.

In addition, during Lilliputian eras, the primary focus of the U.S. army is nation-building and the stabilization of failed states. But Americans usually get disillusioned by these missions and see the outcome as a failed quagmire. Disenchantment with nation-building reinforces the desire to focus on great power rivals.

The Brobdingnagian pivot in the 1930s, for example, reflected the threat posed by an expansionist Germany and Japan. But it was reinforced by a backlash against the banana wars. After Franklin Roosevelt won election as president in 1932, he announced that the United States would act as a "good neighbor," by bringing the curtain down on nation-building missions: "the definite policy of the United States from now on is one opposed to armed intervention."⁴ If the Latin Americans wanted to elect good men, it was up to them.

Why do these pendulum shifts matter? Crucially, Washington views failed states very differently depending on

² <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/nss1.html>

³ Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Cornell University Press, 2004), p. xi

⁴ Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 120-121.

whether the United States is in a Lilliputian era or a Brobdingnagian era.

In a Lilliputian era, like the early twentieth century or the post-Cold War period, the absence of great power threats means that the United States is often free to intervene in weak countries as it sees fit. Without a peer competitor to get in the way, it's up to Americans whether the Marines wade ashore or not. At this time, the United States sees the insecurity of failed states as an inherent problem, and tries to stabilize foreign lands as an end in itself. Whether it's Haiti in 1915, or Haiti in 1994, the aim is to set up a government that can hold the target country together—and any ripple effects on the global balance of power are a relatively distant concern.

By contrast, in a Brobdingnagian era, the calculus is reversed. The United States is not at liberty to intervene as it chooses. Instead, a rival great power may actively resist U.S. endeavors. Furthermore, from Washington's perspective, the insecurity of a failed state is less of a problem in itself. What matters is how the weakened country fits on the global chessboard. The United States will stabilize—or even destabilize—foreign countries as its broader interests dictate. If a failed state is in the enemy camp, the United States has few qualms about encouraging further discord.

During the Cold War, for example, the developing world became the frontline of the global struggle, as both the United States and the Soviet Union aided proxy forces. Washington poured blood and treasure into South Vietnam in a bid to prop up this failed state. Meanwhile, the United States actively destabilized Afghanistan by aiding the Mujahadeen rebels fighting the Soviet Union, and deepened the Nicaraguan Civil War by supporting the Contra rebels battling the leftist government.

What will happen next? The pendulum is about to swing again. With the rise of China, the United States will move from the current Lilliputian era toward a Brobdingnagian era—with a shift in focus away from failed states toward great power diplomacy. The Secretary of Defense recently declared that: “We will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region.”⁵ Obama announced that 2,500 American Marines would be deployed to Australia as a sign of the new East Asian strategy.

The emerging Brobdingnagian phase reflects the fact that China is viewed as the major long-term threat to U.S. security. And this transition is reinforced by public and elite frustration with the costs of stabilizing Afghanistan and Iraq. Americans would rather engage in great power diplomacy than repeat the nation-building Labors of Sisyphus.

The pendulum is unlikely to swing back entirely to the Brobdingnagian extreme. After all, a second Cold War is hardly imminent. Unlike the Soviet Union, China has not built an empire at the point of a bayonet or proclaimed an aggressive ideology inimical to American democracy and capitalism. Furthermore, given the continuing concerns over terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and human rights, the dangers emanating from failed and failing states will continue to hold attention in Washington.

Instead, the pendulum may move toward a middle position, with the United States keeping one eye on the inherent challenges of weak states, and one eye on the consequences for great power diplomacy.

What will be the effects? First, the United States will view failed states less as an inherent problem, and more as an arena for great power rivalry over strategic bases and energy resources. Washington may show increasing sensitivity to the issue of “relative gains,” or whether the United States or China benefits more from continuing instability in Afghanistan, Haiti, or Sudan.

If a failed state is a U.S. ally, concerns over China could redouble Washington's efforts to restore order in the troubled land. But if a failed state is hostile or pro-Chinese, the United States may cast a blind eye to the country's travails, or even deliberately pull the thread that leads to its unraveling.

China, after all, has recently expanded its diplomatic and economic activities in failed or failing states. Since 2004, China has sent over 1,000 police to help stabilize Haiti, in part because Haiti is one of 23 countries that still recognize Taiwan. The long-term goal may be to draw Haiti into China's diplomatic orbit. In 2007, China contributed engineering troops to a joint African Union-United Nations operation in the Darfur region of Sudan.

⁵ Speech by Leon Panetta in Singapore, June 2, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1681>

China has also made significant investments in oil, natural gas, and copper production in Afghanistan.

After 9/11, Washington welcomed Brobdingnagian help in dealing with the Lilliputian threat, by encouraging Chinese investment in Afghanistan. But if we move into a new era of enhanced great power rivalry, Americans may look at Afghanistan in a different light, favoring the country's stability only if it aids U.S. interests, and competing with China over the control of Afghan resources.

Fortunately, we live in a time of great power peace, and war with China is unlikely. But competition over failed states is one of the more plausible scenarios for military conflict. Jakub Grygiel described the potential for "vacuum wars" where the absence of effective government in failed states lures in great powers.⁶ If Indonesia were to collapse, for instance, China might intervene to protect the Chinese minority, provoking military action by other regional powers.

If the rise of China occupies U.S. attention, there may be less bandwidth available for purely humanitarian operations like in Somalia. These types of missions tend to occur only in Lilliputian eras. At times of great power competition, Washington lacks the will for a purely idealistic venture. And a rival great power may also resist Washington's capacity to intervene.

Interestingly, Americans dramatically altered their view of failed states over the last century even when the countries themselves did not change. Haiti has been beset by problems since it gained independence in 1804. An ordinary Haitian might not understand why, during the twentieth century, the United States became suddenly concerned about the stability of Haiti, then lost interest, and then became worried again. Similarly, an ordinary Afghan might not comprehend why Washington, in turn, destabilized Afghanistan in the 1980s, ignored the country, began a major nation-building mission costing billions of dollars—and may soon rethink the value of Afghan stability based on whether the United States or China benefits more.

The waxing and waning of great power rivals has always shaped the American view of failed states. As China rises, Gulliver will view the Lilliputian threat through the Brobdingnagian lens.

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⁶ <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=622>