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What Makes a Great Power?

Sunil Dasgupta doesn't believe that being a great power is based on having superior capabilities over others. The rise of China and India — and the UK's continued relevance — suggest that this particular status is first established through norms and institutions, which then serve as the foundations for acquiring economic and/or military might.

By Sunil Dasgupta for ISN

Following the reelection of David Cameron in May 2015, Fareed Zakaria wrote in the *Washington Post* that Britain was 'resigning' as a world power, which raised once again a central question in international politics: what is a 'world power?' What does it mean for a country to resign from that position or, conversely, to become one?

Zakaria was writing with tongue only half in cheek. World powers—also called 'great powers,' 'major state/powers,' or 'first-rate powers'—are widely seen as central to international politics. Kenneth Waltz, of course, made the remarkable claim that eight such powers had determined the course of international history over three centuries between 1648 and 1979. This "small number of consequential states," has accounted for most of the wars, trade, and economic growth that we see today. Even liberal theorists believe that great powers created and shaped international institutions, including international law.

But what does it really mean for a country to be a great power? As Zakaria explains, "Britain essentially created the world we live in...[as] the first great industrial economy and the modern world's first superpower. It colonized and shaped countries and cultures from Australia to India to Africa to the Western Hemisphere." Clearly, at the time the British laid the foundations of their worldwide empire, the concept of national power was both militarist and mercantilist. It is this notion of power that continues to shape our thinking about great powers today.

Britain's Decline?

The world, however, has changed greatly since. Britain is no longer the leading power in the world, going into decline even before World War I, its resources unable to meet the demands of managing its vast empire. World War II made it clear that Britain could no longer hold on to its colonies and it accepted a diminished role as an ally of the United States, which had emerged as the new superpower on the world stage.

Even from this reduced position, Britain retained what Zakaria calls "a voice that is intelligent,

engaged and forward-looking. It wants to strengthen and uphold today's international system—one based on the free flow of ideas, goods and services around the world, one that promotes individual rights and the rule of law."

Now, it seems to Zakaria, in 2015, that Britain is finally letting go. He criticizes Prime Minister Cameron for not addressing the world's big challenges in Greece, Ukraine, and the Middle East.

The country, Zakaria reports, is now "suspicious of a robust foreign policy of any kind—including serious sanctions against Russia, getting tough in trade talks with China, the use of force in the Middle East and an engaged relationship with the rest of Europe."

Then Zakaria goes on to measure British decline in military spending and military capacity, as if this were a time of British imperial ascendancy. He finds that the British Army is expected to become smaller than the New York Police Department, that the Royal Navy has no aircraft carrier, and that British fighter aircraft are no match for the American counterparts that they fly alongside in NATO missions. Even the Foreign Office budget is down 25 percent and the government has cut support for the BBC World Service, perhaps the most credible Western media platform in many parts of the world.

Zakaria calls it a paradox that London is booming and cosmopolitan, but he misses other important markers of British influence. Britain remains a veto-carrying, permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, one of a handful of nuclear weapons states, a rich country, and one of the closest allies of the United States. Despite Prime Minister Cameron's focus on domestic politics, there is no expectation that the British government will concede any of these positions in the future. To the contrary, Security Council membership can be seen as ensuring that Britain remains a 'world power' no matter what other circumstances change. Indeed, has Britain really resigned as a world power?

Defining Great Powers

From Niall Ferguson and Walter Russell Mead to Zakaria, beneath many accounts of British imperial history written in the last two decades lies Western apprehension about the rise of China. But what does it mean for China to rise to great power status? Will China imitate historical Spain or Germany, ready to go to war in pursuit of its goals? Will its entry as a great power lead to violence, as the rise and fall of other great powers has in the past?

To answer these questions, we have to know when countries become great powers, when they stop being great powers, what processes bring about these changes, and whether these processes change over time. But neither the study of international politics nor practical diplomacy offers anything but after-the-fact explanations. Rather than defining great powers, Waltz compares them to an economic oligopoly, where a handful of players determine the direction of a market. That is, we know a great power when we see one—an argument that would be accused of circularity in most social science classrooms, but one that has also failed to usefully predict momentous changes in international politics in recent decades.

In *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, Paul Kennedy captures the established thinking on the making and unmaking of world powers, arguing that economic growth, usually driven by technological or organizational breakthroughs, enables a society to build a strong military. The military then becomes the basis for expanding international influence, frequently in the form of an empire. With time, as the costs of managing the empire rise due to rebellion and competition, the economy becomes unable to support expansive national interests, leading to imperial overstretch and the decline of the great power.

Two elements of Kennedy's argument need highlighting. First, while the great power status of a

country is based on its economic and military capabilities, the measure of power is always relative. That is, it matters little that a country is growing economically and militarily if another country is growing faster: the country with the faster growth has more relative power and should prevail in direct competition. Second, the rise of a great power is based primarily on economic growth at home—the slowing of which ultimately brings great powers down. In other words, the rise of great powers is an ‘inside-out’ process that begins with relative advantages at home.

Inside-out, or outside-in?

Since the end of World War II, however, international norms have reduced the importance of both 1) conventional economic and military capabilities and 2) a country’s position relative to others in this regard. While the intense rivalry between the United States and the former Soviet Union overshadowed serious discussion of norms and beliefs during the Cold War, it became clear thereafter, with the rise of Japan and Germany as economic heavyweights with limited military capacity, that there were other pathways to great power status.

China presents an even more interesting case because it was recognized as a great power even without economic advancement. Once Japanese occupation ended, practically every major power immediately recognized China as a great power—despite its poverty, internal conflicts, and weakness. While the Communists and the Republicans fought over legitimacy, there was a place reserved for China on the newly formed United Nations Security Council. Taiwan would hold this seat until 1971, but the other great powers always accepted that a China deserved a seat on the Council. Despite the absence of observable measures of great power capacity, ‘China’ was nevertheless a great power.

The norm of decolonization—which ended the association between imperial influence and great power status—paved the way toward assessing great powers in terms of their latent capacity, based on size, population, and perhaps history. The usual logic of national power—a strong economy supporting a strong military leading to international influence—was no longer necessary. China had reversed the process: it became recognized as a great power first and thereafter used this position to pursue economic growth. India’s first prime minister also did something similar, proclaiming India as a great power from the moment of its independence from Britain in 1947. Economic development followed, was then lost, and picked up again in the 1990s. By contrast with Kennedy’s argument, we might think of these countries as pursuing an ‘outside-in’ course of becoming a great power.

Post-war aspirants to great power status have sought to formalize the discontinuity between economic growth and military power. In Germany and Japan, new constitutional provisions prohibited military rearmament. While the victorious Allies initially imposed these prohibitions, the peoples and the governments fully embraced the notion over time to the point that scholars now say that both countries have developed a culture of pacifism. This is why recent efforts by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to reinterpret Article 9 of the Japanese constitution to allow military participation in coalition forces is so controversial inside and outside Japan.

Later aspirants to great power status such as China, India, and Brazil have not had constitutional provisions forced upon them, but they too have sought other means to emphasize the delinking of economic growth and military power. In China, Deng Xiaoping espoused a strategy of peaceful rise. Current Western fears of the security consequences of Chinese economic growth are in large part based on the fact that Chinese leaders have not been able to convince other states that their growing economic strength will not lead to military rearmament and an aggressive foreign policy in line with the expectations laid out by Kennedy.

In contrast, the rise of India and Brazil has not led to similar fears because both countries demonstrate clear breaks in the connection between economic growth and military aggression. In

India's case, its longstanding and deep-rooted strategic restraint has deprived its military modernization programs of the political attention necessary for the kind of rearmament that will make other great powers apprehensive of Indian economic growth. In Brazil, the hard-won transition from military rule has served a similar purpose of indicating to outsiders that the country is unlikely to bridge the civil-military divide sufficiently to mount a serious military challenge no matter its economic progress.

While motivations may change in the future, hurtling the world's great powers back toward conflict, as happened in the run-up to World War I, the outside-in character of the rise of these contemporary aspirants suggests that great power influence today comes in greater measure from institutional, interdependent, and normative sources than from military capacity rooted in economic might. Furthermore, because great power status increasingly comes from mutual recognition, states breaking rules and norms can be sanctioned more easily without the use of military force. We know about economic sanctions, but withdrawing or diminution in recognition even with small measures such as travel restrictions can force states to change policies. It is worth noting in the context, the role of Spanish courts in sanctioning past human rights abuses in South America. Combined with the fact that the greatness of great power is itself limited as power does not automatically extend from economic to military to diplomatic domains, great power status today is less enduring and more contingent on the day-to-day behavior of leaders and states.

Therefore, rather than be dismayed by the inward-turn in British politics, we should recognize that the country's recent trajectory may be reflecting this new divergence between economic and military power. Indeed, the British people may recognize more clearly than some American strategists that large, independent conventional forces may not be very useful in the 21st century and are perhaps inconsistent with the pursuit of other goals. Zakaria himself writes that the British "government has been more than willing to travel around the world petitioning for investment, whether it be Chinese, Russian or Arab." The pursuit of investment from those sources is simply inconsistent with Zakaria's exhortation that Prime Minister Cameron to pursue a more "robust" foreign policy against those states.

To be sure, there is a choice here because the alliance with the United States is itself a great source of Britain's continued influence in the world. Refusing to share the burden of alliance diminishes British influence in one way, but it is worth recalling that the British people rejected Churchill's view of an imperial, expansive Britain within weeks of V-E Day. Churchill's defeat in the 1945 elections opened the path to the rapid decolonization of India and other British possessions around the world. These steps not only adjusted the country to a new role, but allowed it to enjoy considerable subsequent prosperity and influence. By moving away from old, relativist, and militaristic views toward more institutional, interdependent, and normative notions of influence, Britain is in fact affirming its "intelligent, engaged, and forward-looking" and pragmatic voice, not abandoning it.

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