Power Politics and the Powerless

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1   Introduction

A slide in a Washington security briefing captures the conventional wisdom of the age. The slide is dominated by a triangle, and the label in the middle reads, "21st Century Security Threats." The top corner of the triangle is labeled, "Failed States," the bottom left, "Terrorism," and the bottom right, "WMD." The slide captures graphically the perception of threat as it exists in the US and other countries.

This paper traces the emergence of this contemporary view of the security problem. It argues that this perspective is perplexing given the dominant conception of power politics and security. None of our models of international politics can explain why the totally powerless would attack the most powerful. Nor for that matter can those models explain why the most powerful country in the international system would be preoccupied with a threat allegedly posed by states so weak that they cannot even project power within their own borders.

A striking feature of contemporary international politics is the disjuncture between strength and security. The weak do not fear attacking the strong. And the strong feel threatened by the weak. And the international politics of the powerful has become focused on the utterly powerless. These features seem inexplicable in standard accounts of international politics.

2   A Unipolar Age

International relations scholars, of whatever intellectual persuasion, accept the centrality of power and the balance of power. States' pre-eminent concern with security generates a preoccupation with relative power and one consequence of this is a focus, by practitioners and scholars, on the great powers. The most powerful states both dominate and protect small states and pose the greatest threats to others, large and small. The overwhelming focus of the field is thus on the great powers, and the weak are discussed as in "the weak in the world of the strong" (the title of a book by Rothstein 1977).

The choices and interactions of the powerful matter and the weak face a much smaller range of options. Economists make a similar distinction and characterize large firms that dominate markets as price makers. These firms structure the market, deciding how much to produce and what prices to charge. Small firms have no such market power and must take market forces as given and respond to them, they are price takers. Analogously, in international relations, great powers are security makers and small states are security takers. The great powers structure the system and small states are constrained by it.[1]

Recognition of this core reality is inherent in the characterizations of international politics which distinguished international systems by the distribution of power. The period of the Cold War (1945-1990) saw two superpowers confronting one another in a bipolar international system. Each superpower's national security concerns revolved around the other, and smaller states could be threatened or protected by one of the superpower rivals. Realists emphasized the superior position of the US by virtue of having allies with substantial wealth (and thus power or potential power). The dominant position during the Cold War is captured in an article title, "Why Europe Matters, Why the Third World Doesn't" (Van Evera 1990; for the opposing view, see David 1989).[2]

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of military bipolarity ushered in an era of US military preeminence.[3] There are many phrases – hegemony, unipolarity, lone remaining superpower, hyperpower – but they all point to the overwhelming military power of the US. Thus, in the initial period after the end of the Cold War, the case for the importance of the Third World became even weaker and harder to make (David 1993, see also Desch 1996).

Despite agreement on the importance of the distribution of power, different perspectives on the balance of power generate different assessments of unipolarity, its stability and durability, and of the kinds of conflicts that can be expected. Yet, none of them can adequately explain terrorist attacks on the global superpower by non-state actors.[4] And none explain a superpower's preoccupation with weak states.

For the majority of balance of power theorists, unipolarity was to be short-lived. A single dominant power would be seen as threatening to others, who as a result would both increase their own power and combine in alliances to balance the system hegemon. Before long, the world would return to balance, and either bipolarity (even if one of the poles was a coalition) or multipolarity (Mearsheimer 1990, Layne 1993, 2006, Waltz 1993, 2002). The predictions were that balancing against the US would come in the form of Russian, Chinese, French, and even German and Japanese opposition. But a direct attack against the US by the very weakest entities on the planet is not part of the picture painted by this literature.

A competing perspective holds that unipolarity is not unusual, that the balance of power is not an equilibrium state of international politics, but rather that history has seen a recurrence of hegemony and empire. One wide-ranging historical treatment concludes, "the ubiquity of some hegemonial authority in societies of independent or quasi-independent states, stands out so clearly from the evidence that the question arises why studies of state systems and political theory underestimate or even ignore it" (Watson 1992, 314). In this view, the international order is typically provided by a single great power and war and instability result from the decline of hegemony and the rise of challengers. Peace and stability result from hegemony because the international hierarchy is clear and unambiguous. Prospective challengers do not oppose the hegemon because they will lose any military conflict, and hegemons obtain their wishes without the use of force because no one challenges them.[5]

Although disagreeing about the long-term durability and short-term implications of a unipolar international system, all agreed that the world had entered a period of unrivaled US military hegemony. Whether the US would be

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[1] One of the ironies of the realist depiction of an international system that constrains states is that it is better suited to explaining the actions of small states than big ones, but the theory is applied to the latter and the former are typically ignored.

[2] To emphasize the point, during the Cold War, realists pointed out that what mattered to the US was that no opponent gain control of Western Europe or Japan, the two other centers of wealth and power. Indeed, Steve Walt merely totaled the GNP of the the US and its allies and compared it to the Soviet Union and its allies. In such a view, Europe and Japan were central to US interests and the Third World did not matter.

[3] The qualifications in this sentence are necessary. First, bipolarity at most existed in a military sense and not an economic one. The Soviet Union was not a global economic power and following economic recovery from World War II, there were other major economic powers besides the US. Second, there are some who see the end of the Cold War as less momentous since they characterize even that era as one of US hegemony. For them, Soviet collapse only increased the degree of US superiority over others.

[4] For a typology of armed non-state actors, see Schneckener (2007).

[5] This argument was labeled power transition theory (Organski 1968). Similar arguments, with slightly different emphases, include hegemonic stability theory (Gilpin 1981), power preponderance theory (Doran and Parsons1980), and long cycle theory (Modelski 1987). Consistent with this vision of hegemony and order are the recent revisionist arguments made about the nature of empire (Lal 2004, Ferguson 2004; also see Mandelbaum 2005). Niall Ferguson (2004, 2) argued that "many parts of the world would benefit from a period of American rule," but found tremendous people discomfited by his characterization of an American empire (Ferguson 2005).

challenged was in dispute as was the focus for US national security. Those who expected a return to multipolarity saw future challenges from mid-range powers and argued for a US focus on preventing "peer competitors" (the Pentagon's wording). Others expected an extended period of US hegemony characterized by the universal adoption or acceptance of US rules for global governance. No one expected a military challenge to the US by the weakest military groups imaginable, bands of lightly armed individuals. And in neither perspective is there an expectation that US security concerns would be focused on non-state actors and weak failed states.

The events of the last two decades have proved troublesome for both perspectives. There has been little evidence of classical balancing, either in the form of increased military mobilization to deal with the US threat or realignments to create countervailing coalitions.[6]

Yet for theories of stable unipolarity, unparalleled US power should have resulted in a more peaceful global order in which there would be no challenges to US dominance. But there has also been little evidence of the weak and powerless simply acceding to the wishes of the global hegemon. Moreover, the challenge to the US has not come from a coalition of states and not in the form of political opposition to US preferences, but has come in the form of a direct military attack from a non-state actor without even the capability of the military establishment of a typical small state. The attacks on the hegemon have come from the very weakest actors imaginable on the global scene. It is most difficult to explain the declaration of war against the US by a terrorist organization such as Al Qaeda.

Not only have the weakest actors on the world stage challenged the most powerful, the US has in turn become preeminently concerned by the military threat posed by the very weakest. The US, and other countries as well, have come to focus on the weakest countries and on even weaker non-state actors in the form of terrorist groups.[7]

3 The Puzzling Tactics of Terrorists with Global Reach

Asymmetries of power are not new, neither are strategies of asymmetric warfare. When insurgents have little ability to challenge the conventional military power of the state or when nationalists cannot undertake conventional attacks at occupying powers, the strategy of the weak is to act either as guerillas who hit-and-run or hit-and-die.[8] Often, terror becomes the primary strategy in asymmetric warfare.

The viability of attacks by the weak depend critically on technology. The most important development empowering individual terrorists at the expense of the state was dynamite. Revolutionaries looked to it as the great equalizer. It allowed one person to kill much larger numbers thus leveraging their small numbers. In the words of an anarchist journal, "One man armed with a dynamite bomb is equal to one regiment of militia" (Lukas 1997). Dynamite was not difficult to obtain and to deliver against a target. The development of dynamite gave anarchists and nationalists the opportunity to deliver clandestinely sufficient explosive power to kill many people in one attack and to damage or destroy facilities. A history we have largely forgotten is full of what we would now call terrorist attacks, and includes the bombing of Wall Street (Gage 2009) and the Los Angeles Times (Boyarsky 2009).[9]

Technological developments since then have strengthened the state, whose militaries now have tanks and aircraft and any attack on a state requires new strategies. What we have seen are assaults with truck bombs and attempts to leverage technology. In the case of 9/11, terrorists commandeered civilian airliners in order to obtain aircraft with explosive power to carry out an attack. Yet most terrorist attacks remain quite rudimentary.

The weak must of necessity leverage their little strength, but they also exploit the weaknesses of their targets. They have little ability to degrade the military power of their enemies and find it difficult to attack military targets. Unable

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[6] In contradistinction to the expectations from conventional international relations theory, some scholars have seen in the opposition to the US war in Iraq what they have coined, "soft balancing" (Pape 2005, Paul 2005).

[7] Violent non-state actors, some of which adopt terrorist tactics, are long-standing in international politics. Non-state actors invariably emerge as part of nationalist struggles because such struggles consist of movements hoping to become states. But the US is threatened by non-state actors whose strategy is extra-territorial. There is no small irony in Al Qaeda targeting the more powerful US if its purpose is to topple the Saudi regime, for example.

[8] The Iraq war provides an interesting example. In the initial stages, two militaries engaged in combat. Although Iraq possessed some of the elements of modern power, aircraft, missiles, and tanks, it was utterly defeated in a conventional war and inflicted few casualties and little damage. By contrast, the subsequent phase of the conflict, the remnants of the Iraqi military and security services could only entertain guerilla tactics and suicide missions.

[9] European terrorists attacked post offices and trains In London, the Paris stock exchange and the French Chamber of Deputies, and a Madrid theater, among others (Stewart 2005, also see Kassel 2009). Rapoport (2004) characterizes this as the first wave of modern terrorism. Note that the emphasis here on the role of dynamite in modern terrorism differs from Rapoport's discussion.

to defeat an opponent militarily, the strategy of the weak is to use explosives against soft targets, often civilians. Moreover, attacking civilians is not only easier but has the added benefit, in the presumed calculus of terrorists, that it terrifies citizens.

Although we can understand and explain the strategies of insurgents and national liberation movements, the puzzling element is the decision of groups militarily targeting extra-territorial actors. In such cases, they are not native insurgents hoping to mobilize brethren against a local government or a foreign occupier. They are declaring war on a foreign power they cannot possibly defeat and whose population they hope to terrorize.

In response to the 9/11 attacks, the US government had to distinguish Al Qaeda from other terrorist groups the US government had tolerated (and could plausibly be argued to have supported some in the past) as insurgents or freedom fighters. The 9/11 attack on the US homeland and on civilian targets constituted an important shift in their strategy. President Bush, in his initial address to a joint session of Congress said the country's war was with Al Qaeda and "every terrorist group of global reach," thus distinguishing between local and native terrorists and those targeting extra-territorial powers (Roberts 2003).[10]

The assault on the US is difficult to fathom because the overwhelming imbalance of power makes it difficult to imagine the strategy entertained by the weak.[11] Sustained military campaigns waged by purposive actors presume some theory of victory, some blueprint and strategy for achieving one's objectives. Traditionally, victory is achieved by destroying an opponent's capacity to wage war. The inability to defeat an opponent militarily requires the introduction of other factors into the standard calculus.

Terrorism is practically the only option for the relatively powerless unwilling simply to accept their fate. It has the advantage of making use of the little power they have, of exploiting the main weakness of their adversary, and of signaling their resolve. But why do revolutionaries expect terror to result in capitulation rather than retribution? Put differently, what theory of victory is associated with this strategy?[12]

Terrorist groups have declared war and mounted assaults against countries with immense military power. Unlike native insurgents, they have targeted states they do not hope to supplant. They have no hope of defeating these states militarily and even have difficulty attacking military targets. Not surprisingly, they have targeted civilians and adopted terror as a method.

4   Security Concerns in a Unipolar Age: Terrorism and Failed States

As puzzling as small groups of individuals making war on great powers is the response of the latter. Terrorists and failed states now dominate the security concerns of the US and its allies. The US spends more on its military than the other countries in the world combined and yet its security policy is substantially focused on states that are weak and bands of individuals who have no military capability or power projection capability in the usual sense. They have no tanks, no planes. They cannot defeat the powerful countries they attack and threaten.

What weapons they have they have not produced. Indeed, the ability to produce weapons of greater sophistication than a rifle requires a technological base available in only a small number of countries. It is one of the ironies of modern international politics that states fear actors trained and armed by states, sometimes even that they themselves

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[10] Some nationalist movements have been characterized by extra-territorial attacks, such as the few Irish attacks in Great Britain, but the Al Qaeda attack on the US stretched the conception of occupying power to target the US simply because it supported certain governments in the Middle East and had bases in the region (bases which had been voluntarily acceded to, and were the product of invitation rather than coercion).

Subsequently, the US broadened its response to a "global war on terror" (GWOT). More recently, the Obama administration has dropped that Bush-era term in favor of "overseas contingency operation" (for the Defense Department) (Kamen 2009, Wilson and Kamen 2009), and "man-caused disaster" (for the Department of Homeland Security) (Der Spiegel 2009).

[11] Note that this analysis focuses on terrorists attacking the homeland of the US, Britain, and others. It sets aside the use of terrorist tactics by insurgents waging a guerilla war on their own soil against a government and its foreign supporters.

[12] The search for a theory of victory animating the powerless is driven by a presumption that they are purposive calculating actors and that irrationality, evil, and hatred are inadequate explanations for their actions. Psychologists find little evidence that terrorism is a syndrome rather than a strategic tool (Kruglanski and Fishman 2006). Note that treating terrorism as purposive behavior and assessing the strategy of its perpetrators does not imply that it will be successful. As a desperate last resort, it is akin to experimental cancer treatments or a hail mary pass play in football. Something that is tried but has a low probability of succeeding. The relative lack of success is itself not an indicator that the choice or the strategy was not purposive, calculating, and rational.

have armed.[13] And the weapons they can produce are quite crude.[14]

A concern with terrorists has become conjoined with a concern with failed states, places in which terrorists congregate and train.[15]. But this too is inexplicable in standard arguments of power politics in as much as the most powerful hegemon's national security policy focuses on the weakest states in the international system, states incapable of even projecting power to their own national borders. Our standard expectation would be a great power focus on rising challengers, on prospective peer competitors, even on middle states pursuing a nuclear weapons capability (and thus equalizing a great power's deterrent capacity), but not on weak and failing states.[16]

It is interesting to note that this constitutes a substantial shift in assessments of the consequences of political instability. During the Cold War and into the 1990s, the security concerns about political instability in the Third World focused on two quite different concerns. In cases where internal instability was most severe the concern was that the resultant vacuum drew in outside forces which could come to blows. In less severe cases, unstable governments would use foreign conflict to increase their domestic legitimacy. No study focused on the weakness of states as a source of concern because of terrorism.[17]

The contemporary concern is with fragile states, and a substantial literature has arisen on them.[18] Many different labels are used and some make subtle distinctions between weak, fragile, and failed.[19] Naturally, scholars disagree about terminology and whether it is a singular category and even whether it is a useful term at all. Unfortunately, the term is also used by governments and officials' use of terms is driven by political concerns.[20] The Dutch Foreign Ministry, for example, uses the term "weak states" because, in the words of Wepke Kingma, the head of the Ministry's Africa Division, "it's not very polite to go to a president and say 'hello, president of a failed state or a fragile state. We've come to help you'" (Beauchemin 2004). Others have adopted fragile in preference to failed or failing.

Initially the concern with failed states in the early 1990s simply reflected an expanded international agenda, one contemplating humanitarian intervention and the regional implications of political instability (Helman and Ratner 1992). In 1994, at the request of Vice President Gore, the CIA established a State Failure Task Force and contracted scholars to develop models for predicting state failure.[21]

This focus on weak states and on what might be done to prevent internal political collapse, generated some domestic disagreement about the nature of US defense policy. There were complaints that focusing on weak and failed states meant focusing on "the social, political, and economic conditions within borders," and constituted "Foreign Policy as Social Work" (the title of Mandelbaum 1996).

During the campaign preceding the 2000 election, Republicans distinguished themselves from a Democrat foreign policy on precisely these grounds, but 9/11 led to a dramatic shift.[22] There was now a consensus in the US on the centrality of failed states to US security concerns. This consensus was affirmed when Sandy Berger, President Clinton's second national security advisor, co-chaired a task force with Brent Scowcroft, President George H.W. Bush's national security advisor, and their report stated, "Action to stabilize and rebuild states marked by conflict is

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[13] The best example is that of stinger missiles which the US provided the mujahadeen fighting to oust Soviet troops from Afghanistan, but which the US feared when it intervened in Afghanistan. The US tried to keep track of the numbers of weapons transferred and undertook an extensive effort to buy the missiles back (Donnelly 2002)

[14] The US military characterization for the weapons used by insurgents in both Iraq and Afghanistan is improvised explosive devices (IEDs).
  Despite the limited ability of non-state actors to produce weapons, a cottage industry of doom has developed depicting a world in which terrorists can so leverage technology that the entire world can be threatened. At the extreme, we have to come to worry about "super-empowered individuals" (Friedman 1999).

[15] Only in a few cases were the terrorists raised in those societies

[16] Thus, the disjuncture between rogue states and fragile ones. See

[17] The list of reasons given by David (1993) for why the Third World mattered did not include failed states harboring terrorists. Indeed, he focused on strength in the Third World and not weakness to make his case for their importance.

[18] An enormous literature has arisen on these states, on how to conceptualize state failure, how to develop early-warning indicators of it, and how to deal with it. See, among others, Dearth (1996), Dorff (2005), Gros (1996), Milliken and Krause (2002), Norton and Miskel (1997), Rotberg (2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004), and Zartman (1995).

[19] The *U.S. National Security Strategy* documents of 1998, 2002, and 2006 "all point to several threats emanating from states that are variously described as weak, fragile, vulnerable, failing, precarious, failed, in crisis, or collapsed" (Wyler 2008, 1).

[20] The same problem arises with the use of the term "national interest." It is used by domestic political actors and officials characterizing specific policies as in the national interest. But it is also used by scholars as an analytic construct for explanation.

[21] The initial studies are Esty et. al. (1998), and Goldstone et. al. (2000).

[22] "Before September 11th, failed states were largely considered a humanitarian problem. They were seen as an obstacle to development, to democratic governance, to economic growth and to human rights. Failed states were generally not thought of as military or security problems, but as, at worst, regional problems but not a danger to national or global security" (Lambach 2005, 10).

not foreign policy as social work,' a favorite quip of the 1990s. It is equally a humanitarian concern and a national security priority" (Berger, Scowcroft, and Nash 2005, 6).

This shift to a concern with weak states constitutes a recognizable change in standard world politics. This was recognized in a conclusion of the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy: "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones. We are menaced less by fleets and armies than by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few." (US President 2002, 1). The US is concerned about a security threat emanating from states that do not have enough power to impose internal order much less to undertake a bellicose foreign policy.

A vast number of quotations can be amassed, from a diverse range of perspectives, to demonstrate that failed states were seen as a threat: "There is no doubt that failed and failing states present an international threat and require international intervention" (Ottaway and Mair 2004, 1); a Commission on Weak States and US National Security (2004), entitles its report, "On the Brink"; "weak and failing states pose as great a danger to the American people and international stability as do potential conflicts among the great powers" (Korb and Boorstin, 2005, 7); "as a superpower with a global presence and global interests the United States does have a stake in remedying failed states" (Hamre and Sullivan 2002, 95, an article that was part of a task force report); "In the past, governments have been concerned by the concentration of too much power in one state, as in Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. But today it is failing states that provide the greatest threat to global order and stability" (Brown 2009, 18); and "weak and failed states pose an acute risk to U.S. and global security" (Krasner and Pascual 2005, 153).

The focus on the threat posed by failed states is mirrored in the views of US allies.[23] Following the end of the Cold War, NATO also reassessed its strategic focus and adopted new strategic statements in 1991 and 1999. ... Following the 9/11 attack on the US, the European members of NATO invoked article 5 and provided assistance to the US as a NATO member that had come under attack. That logic extended to NATO's involvement in Afghanistan because of the latter's hosting of Al Qaeda, a mission totally out of its area of operation. NATO is now comparably focused on the problem of fragile states. ...

Other countries also have the same national security concerns. In the UK, which has a long history of aligning itself with the US, the same assessment of security can be found. Shortly after joining the US in toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw talked of "the many threats posed by a failed state." More recently, a report by the Commission on National Security in the 21st Century, a group sponsored by a UK thinktank, makes the same point as the US national security strategy: "weak, corrupt, and failing states have become bigger security risks than strong states," and for the same reasons, they could become "jumping-off points for direct threats to the UK via terrorism or transnational crime" (Norton-Taylor 2008).

Similar language can be found in documents from other nations, including Canada and Australia (Lambach 2005, 2006, Desrosiers and Lagassé 2009).[24]

The concern with failed states has not only raised the role of military force and intervention, but has become the focus of development and political assistance. From national development agencies (for example, AID in the US, ... in the UK,) to international development agencies, dealing with failed states has become a central concern.[25] Development has in effect become securitized.

5   Conundrums: Of Protective Belts and Auxiliary Hypotheses

Here then are two puzzles of modern power politics. Incredibly weak actors with little more than improvised or commandeered explosives are deemed a threat by the most powerful country on earth. The first puzzle is why challenge a global superpower militarily and directly. It cannot be defeated militarily. A direct attack on its homeland has expanded its capacity for military mobilization and reduced its presumed casualty-aversion. Further, such attacks have revealed neither broad anti-regime sentiment in its population nor revealed extensive pro-jihadist sentiment elsewhere.

But the reaction of the US and other countries is equally puzzling. Resources are being expended on analyzing and assisting states too weak to threaten neighbors and, in most cases, too weak to control their own territories. Vast resources have been mobilized to hunt down individual terrorists possessing rifles and dynamite.

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[23]This poses a problem for any idiosyncratic, American exceptionalism explanation for this US security focus.

[24] For a complaint about the consequences of "over-securitisation" of the South Pacific, see Greener-Barcham and Barcham (2006).

[25]"The concept of the fragile state is a new theme in post-9/11 international relations, one which became a 'structuring notion for the OECD and the World Bank's aid policies in 2005'" (Châtaigner and Ouarzazi 2007, 1).

In his philosophy of science, Imre Lakatos describes the fixes that scholars append to retain problematic arguments. The most common fix to explain the actions of the weak is to argue that they are powerful.

5.1 A Fix that Does Not Fix: The Power of Cost Tolerance

Terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda are clearly militarily weaker than the great powers they have attacked. They recognize that they they cannot win militarily.

Yet a party with less capability than its opponent can still believe itself to be more powerful because it has a higher cost-tolerance. There are, after all, two dimensions of power, the ability to inflict pain and the ability to tolerate and accept pain. A militarily weaker side can still be more powerful if its ability to punish is greater than its opponent's ability to tolerate pain while it retains an ability to tolerate more pain than its opponent can inflict (Rosen 1970, 1972).

Big states lost small wars in part because of differential cost tolerances (among others, Sullivan 2007). The US experience in Vietnam, for example, reinforced the perception of the US as casualty-averse, as incapable of absorbing much pain. Although the US could inflict substantial casualties and destroy major equipment, military victory could be achieved against it by inflicting more casualties than the US would tolerate. US departures from Lebanon in 1984 in the wake of an attack on a Marine barracks and from Somalia in 1994 in a wake of a deadly battle in the capital Mogadishu.

Although low cost tolerance can emerge from a variety of sources,[26] a key source is the asymmetry of motivation.[27] War, like deterrence, is a combination of will and capability, and the will of a militarily powerful state is weaker when it wages war far from home, over objectives somewhat removed from an immediate military threat.[28]

Yet problems exist for any analysis suggesting that the militarily weaker party relies on these arguments to achieve victory against the US. First, the US has demonstrated in two Gulf wars an ability to defeat an opponent quickly and with few casualties in conventional warfare.[29] Second, the attack of 9/11 was on US soil and reduced this constraint substantially. Indeed, rather than raising the perceived cost of a foreign military involvement, the attack had the impact of cementing a link between events overseas and a direct threat to the homeland.[30]

Al Qaeda's leaders saw Western weakness not only in the effeminacy that they felt reduced their ability to tolerate casualties, but also in the sheer financial costs that sustained military costs entailed. Attacking the West would impose larger economic than military costs and provoking the West into overreaction would lead to an economic bleeding that would eventually result in their retreat.

In the end, Al Qaeda's leaders recognized their extant weakness. Indeed, as discussed below, they shifted strategy to attack the West as a way of dealing with weakness and failure.

5.2 A Fix That Does Not Fix: Failed States with Terrorists with Nukes

The case for the security importance of failed states also entails adjunct propositions. The argument becomes not that failed states pose a threat, but that their weakness and inability to control their own territory provide terrorists critical space in which to organize and train. These weak governments do not threaten outsiders per se, but their territory can be exploited by others who actually pose the threat. Their inability to control their borders provides training camps and havens for terrorists.

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[26] Low cost tolerance on the part of the US is typically characterized as casualty aversion (a term that does not adequately capture the idea). The existence of casualty aversion has again become a matter of debate and contention as the US is again embroiled in war (Mueller 2005; Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2009).

[27] In contrast, Al Qaeda stressed that the US had "reached a stage of effeminacy" (quoted in Hart 2008).

[28] The Iran-Iraq of the 1980s provides a demonstration of the intensity with which soldiers fight under different circumstances. In the initial stages of the war, Iraqi forces penetrated Iranian territory and Iranian forces fought with greater intensity. In the latter stages, Iranian forces, having successfully repelled invading forces, crossed into Iraq and went on the offensive. At that point, Iraqi forces fought with greater determination and intensity. The greater motivation of defending the homeland provides one explanation of this shift.

[29] US battle deaths in the first Gulf War were 147, 11 soldiers died (only 4 were hostile fatalities) in Afghanistan in the toppling of the Taliban in 2001, and there were 109 battle deaths in defeating the Iraqi military in March and April 2003 (for two Gulf wars, Fischer 2005, and for Afghanistan, iCasualties.org n.d.).

[30] Some in the Bush administration talked of the end of the Vietnam syndrome. Indeed, the Bush administration garnered domestic support not only for invading Afghanistan, but also for invading Iraq, even though the latter was not linked to 9/11. In that sense, the attack of 9/11 had an effect similar to that of Pearl Harbor in 1941, freeing an administration that had been constrained by internal isolationist sentiment to go to war against Germany as well as Japan. The attack on Pearl Harbor made possible the very mobilization Japan feared and which insured its defeat.

Yet the concern with failed states as providing training grounds is a concern at some remove, for much of the training can be reproduced elsewhere, even in the US. The kinds of training facilities al-Quaeda had in Afghanistan can be, and have been, recreated on private campgrounds in the US and other Western countries. An EU strategy document adopted in 2003 notes, "Logistical bases for Al Qaeda cells have been uncovered in the UK, Italy, Germany, Spain and Belgium" (European Security Strategy. 2003, 4-5).[31] Not only can strong states provide training facilities, some of them, including Britain and France, "have problems controlling portions of their own territories, such as weak border controls and 'no-go' Diaspora enclaves, in which their police exert little authority, and which serve as facilitating environments for the spread of religiously extremist and violent groupings" (Sinai 2007).[32] Nevertheless, this concern has led to proposals for surrogate sovereignty or some reinstitution of a trusteeship system (Krauthammer 1992, 1993, Jackson 1998, Langford 1999, Fearon and Laitin 2004, and Krasner 2004).

WMDs constitute the critical admixture, the last auxiliary component, to generate a national security threat: "The availability of weapons of mass destruction and the presence of transnational terrorism have created a historically unprecedented situation in which polities with very limited material capability can threaten the security of much more powerful states" (Krasner 2004, 86). Yet, WMDs are way beyond the capacity of failed states and terrorist groups to produce. Indeed, if the worry is about the transfer of such weapons to terrorists by states capable of building such weapons, then the focus on weak states where small groups of terrorists train is misplaced. Rather than focus on large numbers of failed and failing states (the numbers given range from 30 to 46 (Anderson 2005, 2) to as high as 131 (Fund for Peace 2009)), the national security focus would be on the small number of known nuclear states and those pursuing such a capability, and few of these are failing or failed states.[33] Even more ironically, US policy against some of these states is to make them more unstable by sanctions.

In short, a US national security policy that focuses on failed states as an extension of the problem of terrorism, or generic instability, is inherently puzzling, inherently inexplicable in concerns of survival or power politics. Failed states do not create terrorism, they at most facilitate, but are not necessary for, actors such as Al Qaeda (Newman 2007). Failed states cannot project military power and and incapable of autonomous nuclear weapons development.[34] US national security policy focuses on stabilizing failed states because of a concern that terrorists will obtain nuclear weapons while simultaneously pursuing in key cases a policy of destabilizing countries pursuing a nuclear weapons capability.

6   Propaganda of the Deed and Counter-deed

The foregoing has argued that two core features of the modern security environment are totally inexplicable in our conventional focus on military power. Terrorist groups, without the benefit of controlling a state and without the benefit of the conventional weaponry available to the weakest military (tanks, helicopters, heavy artillery), have undertaken a military assault on the powerful states. They have focused their efforts on creating fear rather than destroying military capability. At the same time, the response of the most powerful states has been to focus their security efforts on the weakest states in the system, states that cannot project power.

6.1   Terrorist Audiences

As the substantially weaker party, terrorists can only achieve their goals by affecting the behavior of others rather than through militarily imposing their preferences. This is the reason for the label of terror, the presumption that the

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[31] Similarly, a planned Oregon camp was to offer "training in archery, combat, martial arts, rifle and handgun handling, all in a secure environment in a 'pro-militia and fire-arms state'" (Carter and Bernton 2005). And the training to fly civilian aircraft into buildings was provided here and not Afghanistan. Similarly, visitors to the US have the ability to practice military maneuvers in paintball exercises.

[32] Some have even suggested that failed states are less useful to terrorist groups than weak states because the former cannot provide the requisite infrastructure terrorists require whereas the latter provide infrastructure while not able to control such groups. It has even been suggested that terrorists are most vulnerable in failed states, that they "are not 'safe havens'; they are defenseless positions" (Dempsey 2002, 13). In contrast, the case for the importance of training facilities in a weak host state is made by Takeyh and Gvosdev (2002) and by the report of the 9/11 commission (see Miko 2004). For a correlational assessment, see Piazza (2008).

[33] Ironically, the US and its allies could deal with the problem of failed states and groups such as Al Qaeda and still face the problem of states with nuclear weapons who could transfer them to terrorist groups of their own creation so as to see the weapons used and not experience retribution.

[34] This is an important proviso in that the number of countries that autonomously and independently developed nuclear weapons is smaller than those that currently possess them. Most of the current nuclear weapons states received assistance from others in initially obtaining reactors and other nuclear facilities. This was the reason for the construction of international rules for such transfers.

strategy depends not on the actual harm inflicted but on the fear instilled in those not directly affected. It is essential then to understand the target audience of terrorist action, which can differ from the actual target of an attack.[35]

Al Quaeda's objective has been, and continues to be, the reestablishment of the caliphate uniting Muslims in one state again controlling all lands once ruled by Muslims and governing according to Islamic law. Achieving this requires toppling Arab governments they consider apostates and removing Western power and influence. Their original strategy focused on the near-enemy, regimes they deemed weak and illegitimate.

In attacking New York and Washington on 9/11, Al Qaeda undertook "out-of-area" operations, and shifted from a strategy that targeted the "near enemy" to one focused on the "far enemy." It was a change borne of failure in their effort to generate uprisings against, much less topple, regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. There was some division in the organization about the wisdom of the shift, but one key was the sense that such an attack would galvanize the *umma*.

The Al Qaeda decision to engage in out-of-area operations did not entail a shift in audience. Though Americans were targeted, the actual audience for the attack of 9/11 was the *umma*, the Muslim community. The attack was intended to convey the extent of anti-US sentiment in the Arab world and thereby embolden those opposed to US interests in the region.[36]

Al Qaeda's efforts reflected not their extant power, but their assessment of their prospective power, of the power they could mobilize. Their focus was and is on mobilizing the *umma*, the Muslim community, to rise up and topple the local regimes that rule them and expel Western power from current and former Islamic lands (Palestine and Andalusia). As with anarchist terrorists in the nineteenth century, they conceive of the propaganda of the deed.[37] The language they use is that of past revolutionary theorists. They talk of the role of a vanguard and of violence.

An extension of this argument is that the purpose of violence by the weak is to generate an overreaction by the target. Its purpose is to goad and provoke, and the excessive response, with much collateral damage (by the very nature of over-reaction) leads to a weakening of support for the over-reacting target.[38] It is the second-order effect, the impact of the response, that is the key to victory. It is the over-reaction by the more powerful that increases the number of supporters of the otherwise weak and marginal.[39]

These varied explanations all make assumptions about the distribution of preferences and the existence of incomplete information in some community (in the targeted country or in the Arab world, or in the country that will be the focus of retaliation). Terrorist violence serves as a signal that conveys information to some actors who otherwise have incomplete information. In one case, for example, the 9/11 attacks are said to convey to US citizens the degree of opposition that exists in the Arab world to the US and/or its policies.[40] In another case, the 9/11 attacks are said to convey to Arabs and Muslims the degree of anti-regime and anti-US sentiment in different countries. Violence is intended to mobilize by conveying to individuals that others share their antipathy for the governing regime and the US. Finally, in the case of anticipated and desired overreaction, the point is to convince Arabs and Muslims of US antipathy towards them by virtue of the US response.

These varied explanations disagree about the information transmitted by terrorist attacks. In some arguments,

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[35]Different approaches to assessing Al Qaeda strategy can be found in, among others, Abrahms (2004), Libicki, Chalk, and Sisson (2007) and Hart (2008). On the evolution of its strategy, see Brooke (2008), Cullison (2004), and Zabel (2007). For sources, see, among others, Ibrahim (2007).

[36]Only in the case of the attack on Spain can one make a case that the primary audience was in the target country. Thus, the narrative for the Madrid bombing is that terrorists targeted Spain immediately prior to an election hoping to generate sufficient opposition sentiment to topple the ruling government and have the new government withdraw Spanish forces from Iraq. In formal models, this is often characterized as voters not knowing the competence of their own government. A terrorist attack serves to shift the modal assessment of government competence and thus can affect electoral outcomes and in turn public policy. In this case, the terrorists achieved their aim because the attacks led to a change in Spain's governing party and the withdrawal of Spanish forces from Iraq.

[37]The propaganda of the deed was typically though of, and has been modeled (Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson 2007), as entailing a revolutionary vanguard attacking authority within their own societies. What is distinctive about Al Qaeda is the choice of an extra-regional target to mobilize a local, though transnational, community.

[38]Van Creveld (2006, 226-227) uses the analogy of someone who kills a child to argue that the weak are invariably seen as just no matter how despicable their actions and the strong are invariably handicapped by their strength and the impact it has when used.

[39] This discussion develops a larger assortment of possible audiences than recognized by Kydd and Walter (2006).

[40] In pitching their decision to target the West, Al Qaeda leaders engaged in the same kinds of policy "overselling" as US politicians, and thus offered a number of reinforcing arguments to explain their motivation. Thus it is possible for those in the West proffering an explanation to disagree as to whether the terrorists hate the US way of life, hate Americans, are simply opposed to US policy in the Middle East, and so on. This plagues analysis of terrorist motivations.

attacks transmit information about the attackers, their strength and resolve.[41] In other arguments, however, attacks convey information about other actors. For example, in some models of revolution, attacks by rebels reveal to members of society the degree of anti-regime sentiment in the citizenry (Bueno de Mesquita 2010)

One problem with incomplete information explanations is that they are consistent with short-lived contests in which a few battlefield encounters serve to provide the information the parties did not have at the outset. Revolutionaries who expect a mass uprising following a violent demonstration can gauge mass sentiment in the aftermath. Sustained attacks are thus a problem for incomplete information models of terrorism.[42]

It is not straightforward to animate the rational behavior of the powerless.[43] They cannot inflict much damage against powerful states. Yet their attacks, and the locations from which they stem, have become the focus of the security concerns of powerful countries.

6.2   Unbridled Power, task Expansion, and the Counterpropaganda of the Deed

The US occupies a never-before-achieved position of global power. The US and Europe experience a security rarely experienced in human history. They need not fear attack from an outside power. Their survival is assured.

At first reflection, and in the context of standard models of power politics, the preoccupation with failed states as a strategic problem makes little sense. In and of themselves, they pose no direct threat. Whatever their role in facilitating global terrorism, it is debatable whether terrorists cannot sustain themselves without failed states as inadvertent hosts.[44]

Having achieved security against external assault, the focus of policymakers shifts to the remaining areas of insecurity, to whatever small threats remain and whatever ones can be envisioned in the distant future. Unbridled power generates task expansion and so national security has come to be concerned with failed states and has grown to encompass features not typically thought of as national security ones.

This is strikingly demonstrated in a strategic document drawn up by the European Union (EU). The document has a schizophrenic quality. On the one hand, it notes that things have never been so good: "Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free. The violence of the first half of the 20th Century has given way to a period of peace and stability unprecedented in European history" (European Security Strategy 2003, 1). Central to this, the scourge of war has disappeared: "Large-scale aggression against any Member State is now improbable." Nevertheless, Europe faces "key threats," the first of which is terrorism, which "poses a growing strategic threat to the whole of Europe." Even though listed second, the "Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction is potentially the greatest threat to [European] security," and it is conjoined with the former in that, "the most frightening scenario is one in which terrorist groups acquire weapons of mass destruction" (European Security Strategy 2003, 3, 4). These two are followed by the threats of regional conflicts, state failure, and organised crime, and state collapse "can be associated with obvious threats, such as organised crime or terrorism" (European Security Strategy 2003, 4).

The perception of a national security threat posed by failed states as the exporters of terrorism also includes other concerns: failed states as exporters of disease, organized crime, drugs, as well as terrorism. Most of the concerns linked to failed states are not classic national security ones.

A security policy that focuses on organized crime clearly and drugs implies the pursuit of secondary and tertiary objectives. When the physical and territorial integrity of the state is not in question, the state pursues secondary and tertiary objectives. The great powers live in a period of unparalleled prosperity and security. Nuclear war and even great power conventional war seem largely unimaginable.[45] In such a setting, attention is focused what would be minor concerns in a different era. Even in an age of unparalleled security, militaries still plan for contingencies and

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[41] The assumption here is that the more asymmetric the relationship, the less is terrorist action about signaling strength because the strategy is one of weakness and the relative capability is known. Contrast this with Hoffman and McCormick (2004).

[42] Indeed, there is evidence that terrorists are quite are slow to update their assessments. It is interesting that revolutionary jihadists continue to see regimes they attack as illegitimate and with little popular support, even as their attacks have not generated evidence of widespread anti-regime sentiment. Rather, characterizations of Middle East regimes are treated as if they were common knowledge, in which everyone knows that the regime has little support.

[43] A parallel problem exists in explaining the behavior of extremists (Cetinyan and Stein 1997).

[44] Indeed, some argue that true failed states are of little use to terrorists because they cannot provide the infrastructure terrorists require, and that terrorists prefer weak but not failing states ().

[45] The one exception is the possibility of a confrontation over between the US and China over Taiwan.

for new and prospective enemies.[46] Even in an age of unparalleled national security, governments still must attend to those threats to their citizens that do exist.

International relations theory provides few useful guidelines for understanding the peripheral objectives pursued by states. A theory that posits that states at a minimum are concerned with their survival is not particularly useful in understanding the interests and actions of states whose survival is assured.[47] Even those prepared to posit secondary and tertiary objectives typically run out of national interests after adding ideology and material interests to security ones. The focus on failed states constitutes an elevation of a host of concerns to security ones.

Moreover, the challenge of groups intent on political mobilization through terror requires a counterpropaganda of the deed. It requires an ability not to be provoked and not to overreact, and absent that, a comparable focus on political mobilization. The effort to counteract Al Qaeda's efforts to mobilize Muslim masses is what is meant by the battle for hearts and minds.

The focus on failed states reflects a combination of the task expansion of the powerful and secure with the need for a counter-propaganda of the deed and the pressure of domestic politics. In democracies, politicians are often not rewarded for their achievements but punished for their failings.[48] The areas of their success simply remove issues from an election campaign. Challengers focus their campaigns on failures (and incumbents focus their campaigns on fear of the alternative). Political leaders must thus have something with which to answer criticism about the failure to act and respond.

Failed states and the externalities they generate – refugees, disease, conflict, and so on – can embroil the US because they affect conscience if not security. It is striking that this point is made by two realists who served in the Bush administration, Richard Haass (Berger, Scowcroft, and Nash 2005, xiii) and Stephen Krasner. The latter wrote, as part of an argument for new institutions for dealing with failed states, "Poorly governed societies can generate conflicts that spill across international borders. Transnational criminal and terrorist networks can operate in territories not controlled by the internationally recognized government. Humanitarian disasters not only prick the conscience of political leaders in advanced democratic societies but also leave them with no policy options that are appealing to voters" (Krasner 2004, 86). What is striking is how far removed these criteria for action are from security and power and threat.

An expansive notion of the requisites of security has generated a concern with the weeks on the part of the strongest. For both domestic and international counter-mobilization reasons, powerful states now treat humanitarian concerns as having security implications. Security policy is driven by a confluence of humanitarian concerns and the political concerns of government officials to be seen as doing everything possible to prevent a terrorist attack on the homeland (Feith 2008) and responding to domestic sentiment. The result, for critics, is an elevation of the domestic and international politics of conscience.

7 Conclusion

International relations scholars typically begin with power.[49] Exogenous forces may change power relations, but certain dynamics flow from the resulting distribution of power. Questions that lie outside the ken of the field include which country experiences an industrial revolution first, which develops the atomic bomb, which country implodes, and so on.[50] Power politics purports to explain what follows such disturbances in the balance of power, and although it may be incomplete in explaining the behaviors of great powers, relative power is thought to be most constraining of the behavior of the weakest actors in the system.[51]

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[46] Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff noted in the early 1990s that "I'm running out of demons, I'm running out of villains. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung" (Kaplan 1991).

[47] Scholars have typically broken down into two camps when assessing secondary state objectives: those who emphasize inductive or subjective criteria versus those with a deductive or objective approach (Rosenau 1968, Krasner 1978).

[48] For such an argument about the economy and US electoral politics, see Brown and Stein (1982).

[49] Even those who are not realists accept the centrality of power in international relations.

[50] For many in the field, the implosion of the Soviet Union was just another exogenous factor, for others the field's inability to predict the event was a matter for soul-searching and the spur to pursue new intellectual directions.

[51] Balance of power is a typical equilibrium theory that describes the forces that maintain equilibrium, but treats shocks to that equilibrium as exogenous. For a brief explication of realism and neorealism, see Stein (2001).

What we observe in this world of immense power disparity does not conform to the conventional expectations of power politics. Vast asymmetries of power transform the calculus of both the strong and the weak.

Our standard vision owes much to the words spoken by the Athenian envoys in what has come to be known as the Melian Dialogue. The most famous line uttered by the Athenians is that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."[52] This phrase captures the implication that the strong have choice and the weak do not, they are constrained by their weakness. What makes their point even stronger is what they say immediately preceding this famous phrase, "since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." What they are saying is that power matters most in relations between states when the states are clearly unequal in power. Issues of justice, of right and wrong, only arise in the relations of states of equal power. When power is highly asymmetric, it is only power that matters, and the weak have no choice.

Yet, as discussed in this paper and evinced especially in the last decade, asymmetries of power do not conform to this simple calculus. The Melians make two points about submission. First, they say, "we know that the fortune of war is sometimes more impartial than the disproportion of numbers might lead one to suppose; to submit is to give ourselves over to despair, while action still preserves for us a hope that we may stand erect." The outcomes of war, they point out, do not always reflect the initial disproportion in power, and so this provides some hope. Giving up generates the certainty of despair, whereas resistance embodies that hope, however small. And they continue, "You may be sure that we are as well aware as you of the difficulty of contending against your power and fortune, unless the terms be equal. But we trust that the gods may grant us fortune as good as yours, since we are just men fighting against unjust, and that what we want in power will be made up by [those] who are bound, if only for very shame, to come to the aid of their kindred. Our confidence, therefore, after all is not so utterly irrational." They know that they are less powerful, but they believe that justice is on their side, and they trust in the gods and hope for others to come to their aid.

One can transpose this conversation to modern times and hear the arguments of Al Qaeda leaders. They recognize the inequalities in power, and their hope in god is one of utter certainty and not just the hope for comparable good fortune, but the key to their hope is the mobilization of the masses of Muslims in their struggle.[53]

This vision of action as preserving hope in contrast to submission fits with prospect theory and the argument that people will opt for risky choices with worse expected utility rather than accept a sure loss.

Having heard the argument of the Melians, the Athenians point out in response, "your strongest arguments depend upon hope and the future" which stand in contrast to your scant resources. The Athenians recognize that the Melians are revolutionaries, focused on a future they intend to bring about rather than a present: "Well, you alone, as it seems to us, . . . regard what is future as more certain than what is before your eyes, and what is out of sight, in your eagerness, as already coming to pass."[54]

But large asymmetries in power affect the strong as well as the weak. As the world's sole superpower, the US is subject to imperial temptation.[55] At a minimum, relative growth in power leads to expectations of greater compliance by others.

Whatever one argues about whether the US did or did not succumb to this temptation in invading Iraq and whether it will continue down this path,[56] what is surprising is the focus on failed states, on the weakest states. The greater security provided by greater relative power during the last decades led to the elevation of minor concerns into major ones, and the elevation of non-security concerns into security ones. Thus we observe what some would call the securitization of failed states.

The combination of a globally connected world and immense power asymmetry changes the viability and utility of military power. The weak cannot defeat the strong militarily, yet can use force to as part of a strategy of political mobilization. A weak non-state actor militarily targets the most powerful country on the planet in order to convey

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[52] The quotations in this section are from the Crowley translation, and can be found in Thucydides (1996, 351-356).

[53] In contrast, the Melians were looking to their allies to come to their assistance.

[54] Kissinger (1966) describes this as a charismatic-revolutionary type of leadership.

[55] The point was made in the wake of the first Gulf War (Tucker and Hendrickson 1992) and repeated after the Iraq War a decade later (Joff 2006).

[56] In that regard, it is interesting to note the changing subtitles of the book Niall Ferguson wrote championing a US imperial role. The hardcover, published in 2004, was titled, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*; the paperback, published in 2005, was called, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*. Changes in book titles published during the last decade provide one metric of the half life of the imperial temptation if not the empire.

hope and possibility to people in other parts of the world. The actions matter more for their symbolic and signaling import than for their actual physical consequences. The focus of the groups and their actions is on the potential and not the actual. Violence is used to actualize the potential power of mobilized masses.

And the strong, unprecedentedly secure, adopt foreign policies that deal with matters far removed from their core security concerns. Tertiary objectives become elevated to primary goals and their power becomes focused not on military objectives but those of political counter-mobilization.

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