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## Organization of a Power System: Unilateralism and The Balance of Power

Hans J. Morgenthau

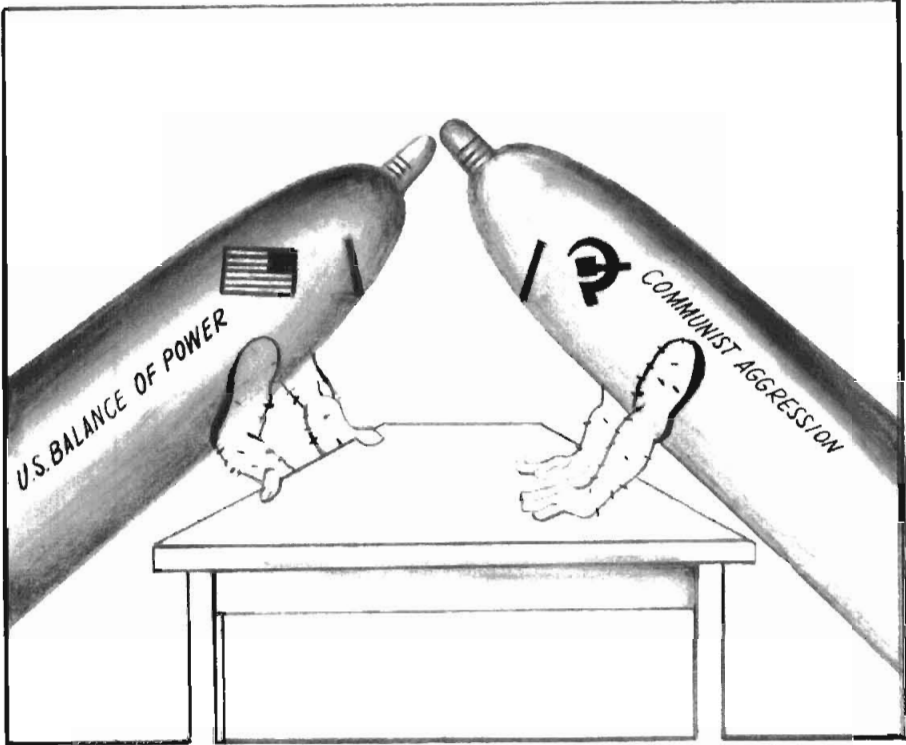
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## ORGANIZATION OF A POWER SYSTEM: UNILATERALISM AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

**Professor Hans J. Morganthau**  
**A lecture delivered to the Naval War College**  
**on 4 October 1967**

The problem which has been assigned to me is interesting for the very simple reason that the issue could be raised at all as a matter of serious choice between what is called unilateralism and the balance of power. The assumption that there exists such a choice points to an age-old prejudice concerning the balance of power, a

prejudice which has been particularly strong in this country, to the effect that a nation has a choice between a balance-of-power policy and another kind of policy supposed to be morally and politically superior. You have the classic example of this prejudice in the great wartime speeches of Woodrow Wilson who said that one of the war

aims of the United States was not to create another balance of power but to make an end to the balance of power; to replace the balance of power with a condominium of power and thereby to make an end also to all the risks, liabilities, and moral ambiguities of what was disparagingly called power politics. You have an echo, and a very strong echo, of this negative conception of the balance of power in the statement which the then Secretary of State Cordell Hull made in 1943 when he returned from the Moscow Conference at which the establishment of the United Nations was agreed upon. He declared that the United Nations would make an end to power politics and all the aspects which go with it, such as balances of power, armaments races, spheres of influence, and so forth. And the very same statement was made by President Roosevelt in his report to Congress on the Yalta Conference of March 1945. In other words, there was here the expectation that governments had a choice between a balance-of-power policy and some other kind of policy. This conception, it has always seemed to me, is utterly mistaken. A nation has no choice between a balance-of-power and another kind of rational policy. It has a choice between a balance-of-power policy and nothing at all. The idea of American isolation and of a policy of isolationism appears to derive from this conception opposing the balance of power. But this is correct only in a very superficial way. For if you go only a little deeper into the history of American foreign policy, you realize to what extent even those who verbally were opposed to the balance of power in actuality operated on its premises.

Take the very early period of American foreign policy. The founding fathers were, of course, very acutely aware of the dependence of the very

existence of the United States upon the distribution of power among the great European nations who were the protectors of colonies on the periphery of the new United States, and they were very acutely aware of the necessity to exploit the divergences among those great European powers in order to safeguard the independence of the United States.

It is interesting to note, for instance, that a man who in theory was opposed to the balance of power, such as Thomas Jefferson, in his diaries and letters during the Napoleonic Wars instinctively always took the side of that party to the war which seemed to be losing at the time. Whenever Napoleon was winning, he took the side of Great Britain; when Great Britain seemed to win, he took the side of Napoleon; and he once even expressed in clear terms the opinion that the future of the United States depended upon a kind of equilibrium between the great European powers.

Take another example, just in passing: the policy of the United States during the Crimean War — a period which is generally regarded to be the heyday of isolationism. Taking a look at the reports of our ambassadors and the orders which were given by the Secretary of State to the ambassadors, one realizes again to what extent, instinctively, the foreign policy of the United States was oriented toward promoting and supporting an equilibrium among the different principal European nations.

Why did Wilson enter the First World War in April 1917? Not primarily because of the violation of maritime rights by the German Navy, but because in April 1917 it had become obvious that without the intervention of the United States there was a very good chance that Germany would win the war and thereby destroy the Euro-

pean balance of power, replacing it with a German hegemony. And why did the United States, from the very beginning of the Second World War, take an open position in favor of the Western Allies against Nazi Germany? Not on ideological grounds, because those grounds had existed before, but again because a victory of Nazi Germany, meaning the destruction of the European balance of power, would also have meant a direct threat to the security of the United States. And why did the United States, immediately after the end of the Second World War, embark upon the policy of containment of the Soviet Union? Because again there was a great power in Europe then in the form of the Soviet Union which threatened the European balance of power.

There is a consistency in American foreign policy underlying all kinds of philosophies about foreign policy, all kinds of governments both in terms of quality and party affiliations. And this consistency is not an accident. For the balance of power is not a matter of choice. It's not something invented by statesmen, let alone professors. It is for foreign policy what the law of gravity is for physics. Surely, if you wish, you can disregard the law of gravity, but you're going to break your neck. And certainly you can disregard, if the fate of a nation is in your hands, the balance of power, but you risk the security and the existence of the nation. So from any rational point of view, there is no such thing as a foreign policy which is not firmly based upon the balance of power. A foreign policy which is not based in such a way is simply irrational and incompetent foreign policy. And, as I've pointed out, even in the heyday of American isolation the United States was not so much isolationist as neutral. It didn't want to get involved in the squabbles of Europe. But it was not indifferent to

the outcome of those squabbles. And I should say that in this respect the national interest of the United States and, in consequence, its foreign policy ran on parallel lines with those of Great Britain. For what the United States felt almost instinctively, Great Britain, of course, noted with much greater acuteness: that any nation on the European Continent which would acquire a hegemonial position by this very fact would threaten the security of the British Isles. In consequence, an approximately equal distribution of power among a number of rival and antagonistic nations was regarded to be essential for the security of the British Isles. What has been true of Great Britain has been true in a less acute sense, because of its actual existential isolation, of the United States as well. And it is interesting to note that what is true of the American tradition in its European policy is also true in its Asian policy.

When the United States became politically and militarily interested in Asia - this was around the turn of the century - it formulated the open door policy with regard to China. This policy aimed, first of all, at keeping the door open to all nations, without discrimination, as concerned the economic exploitation of China. But this open door policy very quickly took on political and military aspects, for in the same way in which the United States had realized that a European power gaining a hegemonial position in Europe by that very fact constituted a threat to the security of the United States, so American statesmen realized that any European or Asian power which would add to its own power the enormous power potential of China would thereby make itself the master of Asia and constitute a threat to the vital interest of the United States. And this general principle underlying the open

door policy very quickly was put to the test in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese war.

Theodore Roosevelt took a very active part in the settlement of this war for the purpose of limiting the effects of the Japanese victory over Russia. He didn't want Japan to become a hegemonial power in Asia by virtue of its victory over Russia, and so he supported Russia against Japan. And this became the basic rationale of our Asian policy up to Pearl Harbor, or one may perhaps say more correctly that Pearl Harbor was the culmination of that policy.

The Washington Treaty of 1922 was an attempt, and a temporarily successful attempt, to limit the power of Japan. The opposition, first verbal and in the late 1930's active, to the Japanese conquest of China derived from the same rationale. And the resistance in the spring and fall of 1941 on the part of Roosevelt and Hull to the attempt on the part of Japan to expand its empire to Southeast Asia and embark upon a virtually limitless course of conquest led directly to a collision course of which Pearl Harbor was the outward manifestation and culmination. As soon as the war against Japan started, we again continued to pursue a balance of power policy in trying to strengthen China as a counterweight to Japan. It is a measure of the failure of that policy that China transformed itself from a potential ally of the United States, providing a counterweight to the power of Japan, to the enemy of the United States, to the main threat to the balance of power in Asia, which now requires another counterweight in the form of Japan. So the superficial inconsistency of our policy is the result of a profound underlying rational consistency, for again we have followed one basic interest in Asia, the preservation and, if need be, the restoration of the balance

of power. Our position with regard to China, in my view at least, can only be rationally justified in terms of limiting the power of China through the creation and maintenance of a counterweight so that China cannot become a hegemonial power in Asia, by that very fact threatening the security of the United States.

It has been said that under present circumstances, especially if you look at the nuclear confrontation between the United States and Soviet Union, that the balance of power either has radically changed its nature or that it doesn't exist any more at all. Again I must emphatically disagree. The nuclear mutual deterrent between the United States and the Soviet Union is the most primitive pattern of the balance of power. That is to say, two political units oppose each other, each threatening the other with destruction if it oversteps certain bounds, and you can imagine two hypothetical troglodytes sitting in the entrances of their caves, each armed with a stone and each threatening the other if he should enter the territory of the enemy, to keep each other in check as long as they can convince each other that a step beyond the imaginary boundary will lead to their respective destruction. It is exactly this primitive pattern of the balance of power which we are witnessing today in the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. And I should say in passing that this pattern has, at least for two decades, preserved the peace between the two superpowers.

In general, of course, the balance of power shows more sophisticated and more complex patterns, more particularly beneath the nuclear confrontation. We are witnessing the traditional ways in which the balance of power operates. It operates through armaments races, through respective increase in the conventional power of antagonistic

— actually or potentially antagonistic -- nations. It operates through the formation of alliances in which Nation A adds to its own power the power of Nation B directed against Nation C, either alone or supported by another ally, Nation D. So you have the classic patterns of the balance of power operating as they have always operated. Only they operate now within the framework of an overall nuclear balance of power which has reverted to the most primitive pattern that one can imagine.

It is an open question as to whether this conjunction between a nuclear balance of power operating through deterrence and the more conventional patterns of balance of power — armaments races, alliances, spheres of influence, and so forth — can indefinitely prevail. And here, of course, we are in the presence of the problem of proliferation. What is going to happen, we must ask ourselves, if and when — and I'm afraid it's more a when than an if — a considerable number of nations will be in the possession of nuclear weapons? There are those who believe — as, for instance, Generals Beaufre and Gallois believe, and it is probably more than just by accident that both are French generals — that this will simply lead to a universal revival of the traditional patterns of the balance of power. Instead of having a multiplicity of nations with conventional weapons, you will have a multiplicity of nations armed with nuclear weapons as well, and they will keep each other in check as they did before, even more efficiently, because of the universal fear of the actual use of nuclear weapons.

This somewhat charming picture of a fully armed nuclear world presupposes a self-restraint and a wisdom and a prudence on a universal scale similar to that which the Governments of the United States and the Soviet Union

have shown in the last 20 years. This, it seems to me, is an assumption which is much too optimistic in view of our historic experience. You need only to imagine what would have happened if, let me say, Sukarno or Nasser or Mao Tse-tung had had nuclear weapons at their disposal during one of the recent crises. History shows that governments are not necessarily staffed by the most intelligent, the most high-minded, the most morally restrained individuals. In many states, throughout history, there has been a very small distinction between what we would call gangsters and responsible statesmen who hold the decision over war and peace in their hands. Indeed, one doesn't need to go to such lengths, one need only to look at human fallibility which is the heritage of all of us. To the extent that you spread the availability of nuclear weapons, you also give this human fallibility greater room to operate. Thus, it is probably too sanguine to expect that even the United States and the Soviet Union will forever have responsible, wise, and prudent governments which will not resort to, or be maneuvered into resorting to the use of nuclear weapons. If this is so, one can certainly argue that in view of the map of the world today, with about 130 so-called sovereign nations, most of which are not even able to take care of their internal affairs, it would require nothing less than a miracle that if many of those nations were armed with nuclear weapons, those nuclear weapons would not be used in one or another instance.

However, the argument of the optimists continues to the effect that these nuclear weapons would be used among the minor nuclear powers, and the major nuclear powers could watch the situation without getting involved. This is highly unlikely in view of the strategy of nuclear war, arising from its technology and the political purposes it

serves. Minor Nation A is not likely to be isolated from the rest of the nuclear nations. It is likely to be an explicit or implicit ally of another, of a major nuclear nation. And it is likely to attack Nation B, a minor nuclear nation which is also the explicit or implicit ally of another major nuclear nation. And while when nuclear war is waged with intercontinental ballistic missiles one can determine, under the best of circumstances at least, approximately the origin of the missile, one cannot do so if a minor nuclear nation, as it is likely to, will use a primitive delivery system. It may use a so-called suitcase delivery system; or it may use a merchant vessel which will blow up in a harbor; or it may use a submarine cruising just outside the territorial waters. And it is interesting to note that the two major of the minor nuclear powers, Great Britain and France, have pointed to the possibility that, by using nuclear weapons in the way I have just indicated, they can unleash a general nuclear war, they can force the hands of the major nuclear ally, that is to say, the United States. The British Government, in its White Paper on Defense in, if I remember correctly, February of 1964, made exactly this point. It argued that Great Britain cannot wage war against the Soviet Union with the nuclear weapons it has, and it is not going to use them against another minor nuclear power. But maybe a situation will arise in which it wants to wage nuclear war, or at least use the threat of nuclear war, and the United States might not; it can then force the hand of the United States. And the London *Economist*, more bluntly commenting on this statement, argued that the Russians will not see the Union Jack painted upon the nuclear missile with which we (the British) will hit them.

Here is, I think, the main danger to

the peace and order of the world arising from proliferation. In other words, the balance of power, in the nuclear sense, is not likely to operate as it has operated in the past when nations were armed with conventional weapons. And I should also say, emphasizing merely what I have said before, that the nuclear deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union, while it is in its pattern the most primitive type of the balance of power, operates in a different way. It doesn't operate through the actual use of nuclear weapons through which the balance is reaffirmed or disaffirmed, as the case may be. But it operates through the deterrence of both sides, both being convinced that this balance exists.

It is, of course, an open question as to whether the balance in which we and the Russians believe in actuality exists. This is always a problem in balance-of-power calculations, and in the past a nation which was convinced that the distribution of power favored it, that it had an advantage and especially an advantage which might not last, would then go to war in accord with its own estimation of the balance of power. Since generally somebody loses in a war, obviously somebody always makes the wrong calculations about the balance of power. But when it comes to nuclear weapons, neither side can afford to put its calculations about the balance of power to the test of actual experience, because even if it is proven to be right, it will probably lose because it will suffer unacceptable damage. And when it is proven to be wrong, of course it will be destroyed by the nuclear power of the other side which it has underestimated. It is this novelty of nuclear power which, while it has not changed the pattern of the balance of power, has changed the application, the actual realization.

It is this novelty which has raised

another question which your outline also raises, and that is whether the balance of power ought to be replaced by something else. Does the balance of power still perform the function which it has performed, however incompletely, in the past, to preserve at least a modicum of peace and order in the world? In other words, the question arises as to whether the present state system, based upon a multiplicity of sovereign nations keeping each other in check through the instrumentality of the balance of power, is still adequate to perform the basic function any political arrangement must perform, that is to say, to preserve a modicum of peace and order in the relations among nations. I think a good argument, at least a good rational argument, can be made in favor of the proposition that nuclear power which is, of course, only the most spectacular example of general technological power in the fields of communications, transportation, and warfare, that the whole modern technological world, which we have created and which we are in the process of re-creating again and again, has made the nation-state as obsolete as a principle of political organization as the first industrial revolution did the feudal system as a principle of political organization.

I think a rational case can be made in favor of the proposition that the basic function of government, the preservation of a modicum of peace and order, can no longer be adequately performed within the present state system. In other words, the destructive power of the modern instruments of warfare, together with the potential unification of the world through the modern technologies of communications and transportation, has made the nation-state an inadequate instrument of political control. It is not by accident that the only true relatively self-

sufficient nations are not nation-states but continental states, the United States and the Soviet Union. This suggests, with regard to nuclear war, a direct relationship between the extent of territory and the viability of states. The traditional nation-states of western Europe, such as Great Britain, France, and Germany, are so utterly vulnerable to nuclear war that their destruction is a foregone conclusion.

I remember a few years ago I gave a lecture at the NATO Defense College, and I said that three H-bombs were all that was needed to wipe the British Isles off the face of the earth. A British general got up, quite indignant, and said that it wasn't so, it was five H-bombs. In any event, it is the smallness of the territories and the enormous concentration of population and industry in those territories which make those nations, let us say, natural targets for total nuclear destruction. It is only continental nations which, with their enormous expanse of territory and widely dispersed concentrations of industry and population, while also enormously vulnerable, are not so vulnerable that their total destruction can be regarded to be a foregone conclusion.

But in any event, if one accepts as the rational argument that the system of a multiplicity of sovereign nations, preserving peace and order through the instrumentality of the balance of power, has become obsolete, the conclusion is not the abolition of the balance of power while keeping the sovereign nation-state intact. The logical conclusion is a radical transformation of the state system with a concentration of governmental power in one center which will do for the nations of the world what national governments today are doing for individual citizens, that is to say, to maintain a modicum of peace and order. This is, of course,



another way of saying that a world government, a world state, is the only rational alternative to the present balance-of-power system.

Let me come back to the argument, which I regard to be naive, against the balance of power while remaining wedded to the present state system. This is completely inconsistent. It is psychologically understandable because our deepest loyalties, of course, are still tied to the obsolescent nation-state. It would require a revolutionary transformation of our moral allegiances, our loyalties, our whole way of thinking and acting if we were to transfer those loyalties from the individual nation-state to which we belong to a world government which is not even on the horizon and about whose nature one can only theorize and with which one has no real experience. But logically, rationally, if one is dissatisfied with the balance of power as it exists today, and if one even regards its operations in a generalized nuclear situation as a direct threat to the survival of civilization on this earth, then one must make a total jump — one cannot just take a half step and oppose the balance of power. One must say that the system of the multiplicity of sovereign nation-states, of which the balance of power is a mere manifestation, must be replaced by something utterly different in which the balance of power is no longer going to operate as it operates today.

But let me say in conclusion, even then, if you are not going to have a totalitarian world government, you're going to have a balance of power or a series of balances of power within such a world government, within such a world society. For the balance of power performs on the international scene a very similar function to that which it performs in the domestic affairs of democratic and pluralistic

nations. It is not by accident that we call our system of government a system of checks and balances. The relations among the three branches of the Government, between the Federal Government and the States, between the two parties, among the different groupings within Congress, all show the basic pattern of the balance of power in which one group checks and restrains the other, and vice versa, so that no single group can run away with the ball. Thus, in a world government, if it is to be pluralistic, if it is not to be a monstrous totalitarian government, you are bound to have balances of power in which the power of one social unit is pitted against the other so that both mutually restrain each other. So let me end in the way I have begun. The desirability of the balance of power is not subject to debate. Whatever its effects are, whatever its weaknesses and its virtues are, it is as indispensable for a pluralistic society as is the law of gravity for the world of nature.

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#### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Dr. Hans J. Morgenthau, Professor of Political Science and Modern History, University of Chicago, has been director of its Center for Study of American Foreign and Military Policy since 1950. He studied at the Universities of Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich; received the J.U.D. from the University of Frankfurt; and did graduate work at the Graduate Institute for International Studies, Geneva.

Dr. Morgenthau was admitted to the Bar and practiced law until 1930. He served as Assistant to the Law Faculty, University of Frankfurt, and was acting President, Labor Law Court, Frankfurt. He was Instructor in Political Science, University of Geneva; Professor of International Law, Institute of International and Economic Studies, Madrid, Spain; Instructor in Government, Brooklyn

College; Assistant Professor of Law, History, and Political Science, University of Kansas City at Kansas City, Mo.; and Visiting Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago. Dr. Morgenthau became Associate Professor in 1945 and Professor in 1949.

Since 1949 Dr. Morgenthau has been Visiting Professor at the University of California, Harvard University, Northwestern University, Columbia and Yale Universities. He has been Visiting Lecturer at the Air War College and Army War College since 1950. He served as a consultant, Department of State; was associated with the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study and with the Foreign Service Educational Foundation. He was visiting Professor of Government, Department of Government at Harvard University in 1960-61.

He has been author or coauthor of numerous books in the field of political science since 1929. Among the latest are: *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, *Politics Among Nations*, *In Defense of the National Interest*, *Dilemmas of Politics*, *The Purpose of American Politics*, and *Politics in the Twentieth Century*. He is editor of *Germany and the Future of Europe* and *Principles and Problems of International Politics* (with Kenneth W. Thompson). He is a contributor of articles to numerous professional journals, including *American Political Science Review*, *The Annals*, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, *Commentary*, *Commonweal*, *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, *Political Quarterly*, *Review of Politics*, *Yale Review*, *New York Times Magazine*, and *Daedalus*.

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The whole art of war is being transformed into mere prudence, with the primary aim of preventing the uncertain balance from shifting suddenly to our disadvantage and half-war from developing into total war.

*Clausewitz: On War, viii, 1832*