

Contra Schelling: The trap of Coercive Strategy in a Multinodal Era

Brantly Womack

Thomas Schelling's 1966 classic, *Arms and Influence*, became one of the major strategic works of the Cold War, and it remains the clearest argument for the implicit logic of American and Russian coercive forms of diplomacy. Schelling is incisive about the credibility of deterrence, but the credibility of leadership is reduced to the Cold War assumption that power is decisive. While the rise of China and Putin's invasion of Ukraine have rekindled interest in Schelling's approach, the diffusion of agency and the interrelationship of issues in the current multinodal era have undermined the efficacy of hegemonic coercion. Rather than restoring Cold War bipolarity, the rise of China has created an asymmetric parity with the United States in which overlapping interdependencies inhibit the formation of camps. In the new era, the pursuit of strategic advantage by any state, large or small, must aim at securing its multidimensional welfare in a complex and unpredictable environment. The global powers are not hegemonic contenders, but rather the largest powers in a multinodal matrix of autonomous states in which each confronts uncertainty. A strategy based on coercion is likely to be less effective against its targets and more costly in its collateral effects. In a post-hegemonic era, Schelling's premise that arms are the primary path to influence must be reexamined.

Keywords: multinodal, hegemony, Schelling, asymmetric parity, deterrence, credibility, China, Putin, Cold War

To an audience of academic experts, Thomas Schelling needs no introduction. For the broad array of persons working "inside the Beltway" in matters of international security and foreign relations, Schelling's ideas are embedded in much of their strategic common sense. As Biddle (2020, 95) notes, "[c]oercion has a long history, of course, but its manifestation as a sustained point of focus in contemporary social science may arguably be traced to Thomas Crombie Schelling's 1966 book, *Arms and Influence*." Notions such as deterrence, limited war, and credibility have been shaped by Schelling, and the term "compellence" was coined by him. More fundamentally, Schelling provided the clearest explication of the

strategic premises of a hegemonic United States. According to Sukin (2025, 725), "[t]he threat of a conditional punishment ... beats at the heart of US foreign policy today." Schelling's focus on the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union might have seemed passé in the 1990s, and his emphasis on bargaining seemed unnecessary for a sole superpower. But with the rise of China, the strategic mental picture for many has moved from "The Cold War is over" to "The Cold War all over again." In addition, Vladimir Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has deep resonances with the Cold War, not the least of which is the correspondence between Putin's actions and the coercive strategy presented by Schelling.

The argument here is that the current and prospective global situation differs fundamentally from the background assumptions of the Cold War and its subsequent unipolar moment. Therefore, a strategic paradigm based on hegemonic domination is an old map giving misleading directions in new international terrain. Because of its embeddedness in the American global outlook, the logical anatomy of the paradigm must be examined and evaluated. Schelling's *Arms and Influence* is the clearest elaboration of a coercive strategy for the US in the context of nuclear risk. The task here is to explicate the premises of

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his argument, describe the different strategic parameters of the current era, and reconsider Schelling's premises. While there is much of enduring value in Schelling's work, especially as it relates to limiting the likelihood of nuclear escalation, his underlying assumptions regarding hegemonic coercion were problematic even during the Cold War, and they are increasingly inappropriate in an interconnected web of autonomous actors.

Thomas Schelling and *Arms and Influence*

To be "contra Schelling" in the broadest sense would be like being tired of London in Boswell's sense. As Richard Zeckhauser's (1989) encomium on Schelling pointed out, Schelling, though a Nobel Prize-winning economist, was limited neither by his discipline nor by the normal realm of academic questions. He was able to pursue and clarify the bargaining logics of interactions of all sorts, from meeting someone in New York City to nuclear war with the USSR. His contribution was to think thoroughly and relentlessly about the problem in view, with the purpose of exploring the successful next move. The reality is abstracted into its logical structure; the concrete details are secondary. Schelling's style minimized citations, presenting a clean argument with occasional discursive footnotes. Albert O. Hirschman (quoted in Zeckhauser 1989, 162–63) noted that Schelling did not attack existing paradigms or build new ones, but rather stuck to the problem at hand. As Zeckhauser (1989, 163) put it, "[l]ike most economists, he loves to assess arenas where the players are anonymous, the outcomes uncoordinated."

On the face of it, Zeckhauser's comment does not seem to fit the arena of Schelling's major contribution, the Cold War. Here the players were the US and the USSR, and the point of Schelling's argument is that their interaction is coordinated by both explicit and tacit bargaining. But Schelling is at his best in abstracting their relative positions, and exploring the options of risk and success in a context of mutual vulnerability. Actual balances of power, ideologies, and courses of diplomatic exchange are only illustrative of the structure of bargaining.¹ Schelling's focus is not the military problem of how to vanquish the Soviets, but rather that of successful diplomacy in a limited war with another superpower. Schelling termed the conflict a "limited" war not because it lacked full commitment, but because the adversarial game took place under the nuclear cloud of mutually assured destruction. In the historical background of Schelling's 1960 work, *The Strategy of Conflict*, the Cold War was still being fought directly between the superpowers. The focal point was the problem of Berlin's vulnerability to conventional attack and the consequent role of nuclear deterrence. By the publication of *Arms and Influence* in 1966, the Cold War had settled into the problem of nuclear management between the superpowers and the larger strategic problem of maintaining global hegemony.

With the collapse of the USSR and the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity, bargaining with a nuclear adversary no longer seemed necessary, but the presumption of hegemonic control was strengthened.

Although Schelling was by no means the originator of Cold War strategy, he provided the most succinct and consequent articulation of its coercive bargaining strategy. It was immediately influential in both academic and policy circles. As Hedley Bull (1967, 25) noted in a review, "Schelling's ideas comprise a very large part of the intellectual content of contemporary strategic theory as it is nowadays imbibed by undergraduates and put into practice by policymakers." A 1984 study noted that Schelling's elucidation of the dilemmas of deterrence "formed the foundation of the academic subject of 'strategic studies'" (McPherson 1984, 238). There was criticism of Schelling's general framing of coercive diplomacy—one reviewer suggested a retitling of *Arms and Influence* to "Arms and Arm-Twisting" (Rodberg 1966, 623). Another hoped for a second volume on "Ideals and Influence" (Guetzkow 1966, 889). In line with his theory of compellence, Schelling recommended the bombing of North Vietnam in 1964 to signal American resolve, though he also suggested that the bombing cease after three weeks (Kaplan 2005). Although Schelling protested the invasion of Cambodia and therefore resigned his governmental advisory role in 1970, Nixon's brief but intense "Christmas bombing" of Hanoi in December 1972 is perhaps the best illustration of Schelling's strategy of compellent signaling.²

Despite his approval of compellence against nonnuclear adversaries, Schelling's bargaining logic vis-à-vis the USSR was based on the common interest of avoiding nuclear war. In contrast to more aggressive colleagues, he wanted the Cold War to stay cold.³ Schelling (1961, 7) noted that "just as it may be to the national interest to form alliances with friendly countries to keep each other's military programs up, it may be wise to form alliances with potential enemies to keep each other's military programs down, or to keep them less provocative." After the sobering experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, there was more reason to focus on arms control within a context of limiting the likelihood of nuclear war. This involved tactical gambits of brinkmanship, arguments against both surprise and rapid response, and support for lowering mutual risk. Schelling considered the passage of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 1972 a major accomplishment, and later decried the deterioration of efforts at arms control (Schelling 1985). With the collapse of the USSR he admitted that arms control had become a secondary concern (Schelling 1991, 21). But the problem of avoiding nuclear war remained, and Schelling became increasingly concerned by the abandonment of earlier safeguards. He opposed the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, and later argued that, if Iran developed

nuclear weapons, the US should assist the country in making the weapons secure (Schelling 2006b). Schelling (2006a) concluded his Nobel acceptance address in 2005 with the following admonition:

The most critical question about nuclear weapons for the United States government is whether the widespread taboo against nuclear weapons and its inhibition on their use is in our favor or against us. If it is in the American interest, as I believe obvious, advertising a continued dependence on nuclear weapons, i.e., a U.S. readiness to use them, a U.S. need for new nuclear capabilities (and new nuclear tests)—let alone ever using them against an enemy—has to be weighed against the corrosive effect on a nearly universal attitude that has been cultivated through universal abstinence of 60 years.

The awareness of mutual vulnerability expressed by Schelling changed with the collapse of the USSR, but his basic approach to coercive diplomacy has remained embedded in realist international relations thinking and in US policy making.⁴ With the rise of Putin's Russia and of Xi Jinping's China, Schelling has returned as a foundational referent for a new era of thinking about global deterrence.⁵ The complacency of the unipolar moment is over. Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 made Schelling's elaboration of the bargaining rationality of superpowers more relevant. Meanwhile, the shift in global power exemplified by the rise of China has appeared to give unprecedented urgency to the maintenance of hegemony. Many of Schelling's specific admonitions certainly remain relevant, for example his emphasis on the wisdom of slowness, deliberateness, and self-control (Schelling 1966, 183). But before his general approach is reapplied in a new era, its implicit premises should be examined.

The Narrative and Premises of *Arms and Influence*

Arms and Influence is not a systematic work, but rather a strong analytic narrative whose coherence rests on its method of addressing dimensions of US international relations. We begin with an overview of its argument and afterward examine its underlying assumptions. Schelling's Nobel Prize was awarded for his contributions to game theory, and it is hardly surprising that interactive adversarial bargaining is central to his approach to international relationships. His focus is not on the balance of military forces or on using brute force to physically defeat opponents, but rather on using threats and actions to influence the opponent's behavior to one's own advantage. Nevertheless, coercive forms of diplomacy should have a credible "or else" component: force if not compliant, assurance if compliant (Pauly 2024). Coercive diplomacy is not necessarily more gentle than brute force. The drone assassination of Qasem Soleimani in 2020 is an example of brute force; the bombing of Hiroshima can be considered coercive diplomacy. Since Schelling's standpoint is that of the US in the mid-sixties, he assumes a preponderance of

power within its sphere of influence, complicated by the Soviet nuclear presence. The task is not increasing arms, but rather maximizing their influence. Schelling (1966, xv) claims in the preface to *Arms and Influence* that his analysis should be "pertinent to the future, just more incomplete," and "if valid in a polarized world, probably just as valid in a world of several competing powers."

The book begins with the task of maintaining American coercive control over nonnuclear powers. Schelling elaborates the complementary importance of deterrence and compellence. Deterrence prevents unwanted behavior, while compellence requires desired behavior. Together they are the essence of what Schelling (1966, 1) calls the "diplomacy of violence." A key to both deterrence and compellence is the execution of the threat of violence in the case of noncompliance.⁶ Schelling compares the removal of the Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 to the punishment of a disobedient child (Schelling 1960, 13, 18), or of a puppy who wets on the floor (Schelling 1966, 38). Bargaining is not a matter of trade-offs but rather of incentivizing compliance, or, more commonly, disincentivizing noncompliance. Schelling sees no limits in using threats. While he considered North Vietnam too insignificant a target for using nuclear weapons, he suggests that they might be necessary to deliver sufficient hurt to China in the event of its invasion of India or of its occupation of Taiwan (Schelling 1966, 185–88). In the European theater he cautioned against the conventionalization of nuclear weapons because of the danger of escalation to general war. But if nuclear weapons were necessary in Europe, they should be used to demonstrate resolve, and if so, they should not be used merely for their military utility or be held as a last-minute option (114). Schelling (2006a, 929) notes in his Nobel acceptance address that the 60-year taboo on the use of nuclear weapons was either a "stunning achievement" or a bit of "stunning good fortune." As far as Schelling's own contribution to Cold War thinking is concerned, the persistence of the taboo was due rather to good fortune.

In dealing with the USSR, the purpose of bargaining remains securing compliance, but the power to hurt is mutual and grave. In a war between nuclear powers, presumably either could achieve victory, but massive devastation can occur regardless of victory. Therefore, both the US and the USSR have a shared interest in limited war and arms control. The idea of massive retaliation, common in the early 1950s, presumed unilateral invulnerability, but with Soviet nuclear capability the possibility of mutual destruction had to be acknowledged. At best, a cold war reduces the likelihood of nuclear use, and even within an ongoing nuclear war, continued bargaining should attempt to limit destruction. Bargaining includes tacit interaction as well as explicit agreements. While Schelling prefers positions in which an action by the other side will produce a promised automatic fulfillment of

threat or reward, he is worried that the pursuit of a first-strike advantage, in combination with the speed of delivery of nuclear weapons, could lead to an unintended catastrophe.⁷ If “winning” in a bargain is to advance one’s own values, then minimizing the risk of annihilation trumps other preferences. Fortunately, both nuclear powers face the same risk in mutually assured destruction, and so the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the development of second-strike capacities became key steps forward.

The strategic narrative sketched above involves several basic presumptions that form the deep background of Schelling’s coercive diplomacy, and more generally of Cold War thinking. First, that rational strategy is based on a situation of adversarial bargaining. Second, that security relationships are decisive over other dimensions of interaction. And third, that the US is a hegemon in competition with a hegemonic nuclear opponent. In brief, rationality is about winning, security is the foundational and autonomous dimension of international relationships, and maintaining command credibility while managing a cold war with the USSR was the core task for the US. Schelling does not argue for these premises. Rather, they form the unquestioned framing of his argument. Schelling certainly could argue for the premises, but it would seem unnecessary to him as well as for much of his audience. The premises were taken as obvious by both sides during the Cold War. Schelling merely elaborated their consequences. These are common assumptions even today, and they seemed even more basic in the 1960s.

These premises must be explored to understand the framework within which Schelling’s logic operates. The first, that rationality is a logic of conflictual bargaining, is natural for a game theorist of his generation.⁸ Bargaining is interactive in the sense that it is an attempt to maximize one’s own interest by influencing the opponent’s compliance. But it presumes that the demands of the stronger side will prevail, and Schelling is arguing from the position of the stronger side. “Coercion requires finding a bargain, arranging for him [the opponent] to be better off doing what we want—worse off not doing what we want—when he takes the threatened penalty into account” (Schelling 1966, 4). A continuing relationship of coercion is based on the constant presence of threat. As Schelling puts it, “[i]t is *latent* violence that can influence someone’s choice—violence that can be withheld or inflicted” (3, emphasis in original). While a coercive relationship may continue indefinitely, it can only continue as long as the constraining threat continues and remains credible.

The second premise, that security relationships have priority over other dimensions of interaction, seemed quite reasonable in the 1960s. The global economy was shaped by hub-and-spoke relationships within the two separate camps. Moreover, the nuclear threat dominated US–Soviet relations. The superpowers were the only powers, and the security risk that the US felt was only

nuclear. As Schelling (1966, 57) noted, oceans well defended the US from conventional threats. Military involvement on the periphery, such as that in Vietnam, could be managed because “for the United States modern technology has drastically enhanced the strategic importance of pure, unconstructive, unacquisitive pain and damage” (33). In a perfectly vertical world of power, *schadenfreude* becomes strategy. The Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated that the potential for escalation in third-party venues could lead to confrontation between the nuclear powers, but it was the prospect of escalation, not Cuba itself, that produced the security concern. The capacity for mutual annihilation created a parameter of arms control within which “small wars” could be pursued.

The third premise, that of the hegemonic capability of the US, was also an assumption more easily made in the 1960s. The premise has two corollaries. The first corollary is that the diplomacy of violence would be necessary and sufficient to maintain order within one’s sphere of influence. The credibility of the hegemon rested on its power of effective punishment. It was impossible for Schelling (1966, 186) to imagine in 1966 that a “third-rate adversary” like North Vietnam would be so foolish as not to accede to the threat of massive harm, and then to continue to resist after the US demonstrated its resolve by bombing North Vietnamese cities. Although Schelling objected to Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia in 1970, the logic of compellence should justify continued escalation of harm unless it created a risk of nuclear war with the USSR. Unlike Robert McNamara, Schelling never reflected on the implications of the failure of the bombing campaign or on the outcome of the American war in Vietnam (Sent 2007, 464–65).

The second corollary of hegemony is that, within its sphere of influence, the US cannot be challenged. The US is not the first among equals. It is the citadel of its camp. There was another camp, with its own commander. The US did not intervene in the Soviet sphere of influence in the cases of Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968, though it was involved in gray zones such as Albania and Yugoslavia. The notion of spheres of influence was common before the Cold War, but the bipolarity of the superpowers simplified it. The rationale for the creation of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council was that each of the five had a sphere of influence: the US and USSR as victors, France and the United Kingdom as colonial powers, and China as the designated central power for East Asia (Freeman 2023).

These premises were hardly unique to Schelling. They underlay the American understanding of itself as leader of the free world, and similar premises underlay Soviet strategy. There were other approaches. Walt Rostow (1960) emphasized the importance of economic development as a path to stable democracy. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977) elaborated the role of complex interdependence in

moving international relationships beyond zero-sum security concerns and hegemonic domination. Nye (1990) later added the notion of “soft power,” achieving compliance without the necessity of rewards or punishments. In the 1990s these more optimistic and complex approaches thrived, and they were supplemented by more radically post-hegemonic approaches such as constructivism (Wendt 1992; 1999) and the English school of international relations (Buzan 2014). But 2008 can be taken as the watershed of a new era. The global financial crisis shook the US-centered economic system, the rise of China saw it consolidate its party-state, and demagogic populism raised questions about the linkage between democracy and development even in the US itself. Meanwhile, increasing use of sanctions has weaponized economic interdependence, and neoprotectionism in developed countries is replacing globalization as policy. A return to Cold War bipolarity is suggested by the designation of China as America’s “pacing challenge” (The White House 2022). It is not surprising, therefore, that Schelling is returning to favor as a strategy for defending American hegemony. Although President Trump avoids the term “hegemony,” his interest in making America great again includes decisive military preponderance, and his bombing of Iran shows a willingness to use it.

A Multinodal Era

There is no question that the US and China, and their rivalry, are major parts of the post-2008 world order. But is this a return to the strategic terrain of 1947–91, or have there been basic shifts in global realities? I argue that we have entered a post-hegemonic era in which the asymmetric parity of the global powers makes persisting rivalry more likely than victory or defeat. Meanwhile, the thick international connectivity created by revolutions in information and communication technology (Baldwin 2016) has replaced Cold War spheres of influence with a multinodal web of interactions. These transformations of global context are sketched here, and they require a critical rethinking of Schelling’s premises, the topic of the ensuing section.

When General Secretary Xi claimed in 2018 that the world order was experiencing “changes unseen in a century,” his primary focus was the rise of China (Bachulska, Leonard, and Oertel 2024). By the first few months of the second Trump administration, few would doubt Xi’s claim, or restrict it to the rise of China (Posen 2025a). At this point, attempts to predict the future lead to a blinding array of plausible scenarios, each in a fragile nest of hypotheticals. More important than the reimagining of possibilities, the structural changes underlying the new era require rethinking strategic rationality for a prolonged era of post-hegemonic uncertainty. The asymmetric parity of the US and China puts the two at the center of global concerns, but the web of contingent uncertainty reaches well beyond their rivalry.

Despite the rise of China and the Trump administration’s commitment to “make America great again,” neither

Xi nor Trump consider the current world order to be hegemonic. As Secretary of State Marco Rubio (2025) put it, “[i]t’s not normal for the world to simply have a unipolar power. ... It was a product of the end of the Cold War, but eventually you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world, multi-great powers in different parts of the planet.” The term “multipolar” usefully distinguishes the current global context from the American unipolar moment after the Cold War, and it implies more complexity than a return to bipolarity. However, it is a residual category, and it raises questions about how many poles there are, the difference between poles and nonpoles, and the difference between those states that count and the rest.

The new era deserves a more substantive term. Many have been suggested: “multiplex” (Acharya 2014), “post-American” (Zakaria 2011), “post-Western” (Stuenkel 2016), “polycentric” (Möckli 2012), “G-zero” (Bremmer 2013), “polygonal” (Noesselt 2022), and “decentred globalism” (Buzan 2011). I offer the term “multinodal” to suggest a relational context in which actors are located at multidimensional vertices of interaction (Womack 2016b; 2023, 161–72). Nodes differ in their situations and connectivities. They are parts of a matrix that is not controlled by polar powers, but in which relative capacity and agent autonomy interact with other nodes in a field of uncertainty. There are asymmetries at every level of the matrix—global, regional, and local—and these set standing patterns of attention and influence. In theory, an actor’s strategic prudence can manage uncertainty to its advantage, though negative dialectics of frustrated control and costly resistance are possible at every level.

The challenge raised by the new era is not how to reapply Schelling’s strategic rationality to a changed situation, but whether it is necessary to rethink the fundamental premises of Cold War diplomacy. And while the current mutual fixation of the US and China on their bilateral rivalry is understandable, the global political economy has moved decisively beyond the possibility of hegemonic control by either. The agency of nonglobal powers has expanded, global value chains have displaced trade in final products, and international connectivity is much less channeled through apex states, or located in one camp or another.⁹ In a world of diffuse agency and reduced coercive efficacy, the primary international question is not “Who is in charge?” but rather, “What is going to happen?” Power vacuums are replaced by certainty vacuums. In reaching back to the coercive strategies of Schelling, the US is trying to roll back a process that it cannot control. It will be argued below that Putin’s adventure in Ukraine should serve as a teacher by negative example regarding the vanity of hegemonic nostalgia.

The multinodal model of the current era is less stable than liberal institutionalism would suggest, and it is more

complex than the great-power confrontation expected by power transition theories. While the era is certainly one of complex interdependence, as Keohane and Nye (1977) would argue, the fundamental task of most actors is to preserve autonomy in an uncertain world. This is most evident in smaller countries, as the case of Singapore discussed below will illustrate. The state must protect autonomy by increasing its capacity to resist, and at the same time hedge against uncertainty by diversifying connectivity and encouraging partnerships. Meanwhile, the behavior of smaller states is not simply the inconsequential noise of the peanut gallery jostling for balcony seats. In a multinodal world, relative power matters, but it does not easily command. Effective international influence by larger powers requires reassurance regarding autonomy and respect for hedging. As Hirschman (1980, ix) acknowledged in the preface to the 35th-anniversary edition of *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade*, asymmetric interdependence does not equate to dependence. Connectivity is at the same time an opportunity and an exposure to risk, and globalization diversifies both opportunity and risk. Economic interaction under the shelter of a hegemonic long peace (Wagner 2010) did not face the current challenges of post-hegemonic flux.

While liberal institutionalism seems too complacent, the dynamics of the new era should not be simplified into a crisis of power transition between the US and China. The classic theories of power transition (Organski 1968; Organski and Kugler 1980; Tammen and Kugler 2006) focus on the approach to parity of the rising power, and many others emphasize the inevitability of great-power conflict (Mearsheimer 2001), the ambitions of China (Friedberg 2012), or anxiety about a “Thucydides trap” (Allison 2017). A situation of protracted global rivalry does indeed seem inevitable, though the ambiguous moment of parity, economic enmeshment, and prospective costs of conflict lower the likelihood of war (Duan 2025). As China wakes up each morning it will look east, and America will look west. However, their asymmetries of resources and situation mean that they do not face each other as two boxers in a ring. Moreover, while the onlookers also pay close attention to the global rivalry, they are neither passive nor precommitted to a side. These complications by no means preclude war, even catastrophic nuclear war. As the Chinese scholar Yu Keping (2023) argues, the age of hegemonic empire is over, but the temptations of imperialism remain (Fei 2023).

The US and China have reached global asymmetric parity (Womack 2016a) in that together they are the middle third of the world economy, half of the world’s military expenditures, and are the only two countries generally considered to be global powers. But while they are a risk to one another, neither their capacities nor their vulnerabilities are symmetric. Their asymmetry begins with gross domestic product (GDP), the economic

bottom line, and continues through all aspects of their relationship. Tammen and Kugler (2006, 43) provide a useful rule of thumb for expecting a power transition. According to them, troubles can be expected to begin when the rising power reaches within 20% of the incumbent’s GDP, and they pass beyond transition when the now risen power exceeds the former incumbent’s GDP by 20%. But by which measure of GDP? Using purchasing power parity (PPP), China reached 80% of the US GDP in 2010 and surpassed 120% in 2023, while compared at the exchange rate, China will not reach 80% until 2037 and will surpass 120% only in 2063.¹⁰ Not only is China already comfortably beyond the US by one measure, but at the point it surpassed the US it still had 14 years to go before reaching the other measure’s power transition threshold! The difference reflects vastly asymmetric economic structures. Both the quantity of production and its exchange value are meaningful measures. In a trade war, China should have an escalatory advantage (Medeiros and Polk 2025; Posen 2025b).¹¹ In a military conflict, wealth and technology should give the US the advantage. The disparity in development and wealth is reflected in per capita differences. China’s GDP per capita, even in PPP terms, is 29% of that of the US, and will not reach 50% until 2052. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the US is the avatar of “the West,” while China is the avatar of “the Rest.”

The geopolitics of the two is in even greater contrast than their economic levels. The US is habituated to being a two-ocean global economy centered on finance. China is ringed by 14 land neighbors and the seaward barriers of Japan, Taiwan, and Philippines. China has only recently regained economic centrality in Pacific Asia. For all its political tensions, the economic region comprising Korea, Japan, Greater China, and Southeast Asia has become larger and more integrated than North America and the European Union combined. China’s regional economic relationships are the foundation of its rise as a global power, and its regional political challenges, most obviously with Taiwan, Japan, and the Koreans, are the key question marks over its future prospects. If China attempted to fence in its Pacific Asian neighborhood, it would destroy the foundations of its global power (Womack 2023).

The asymmetry of global parity has two contrary bilateral effects. On the one hand, the US and China are running different races. While each judges itself by its relationship to the other, they are taking different steps toward different goals. The financial strength, embedded centrality, and innovative acumen of the US are not intrinsically a threat to China; neither is China’s continued economic development a direct threat to the US. Indeed, for the past 40 years the prosperity of each has depended on the asymmetric contribution of the other. On the other hand, however, asymmetry engenders structural misunderstanding, while parity sharpens the mutual perception

of risk. An asymmetric relationship is best viewed not as a single relationship, but as a bundle of two: A to B, and B to A. Each side perceives the other through the lens of a quite different exposure, and interprets what it perceives using its own set of national experiences (Womack 2006, 78–85; 2016b, 43–47). The interpretations of the other's behavior are often a misleading projection of one's own situation.¹² The US and China do not understand one another, and will not. Mature asymmetric relationships are not based on cognitive convergence, but rather on mutual respect, common interests in avoiding hostility, and cooperation when possible. Asymmetric maturity often emerges from stalemate, and in the case of the US and China, neither can eliminate the other without the likelihood of self-destruction.

Meanwhile, the US and China are not generals of their respective camps. The current multinodal world order¹³ is a matrix of active agents, both state and nonstate.¹⁴ To be sure, hegemonic control is never easy. Davids have a long history of frustrating Goliaths, and have good reason to do so (Gallarotti 2010; Sechser 2010). Mack (1975) provided the classic analysis of the archetypal modern case, the American war in Vietnam. But the small wars of the Cold War era were essentially bilateral affairs, while Putin's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates that now nothing remains bilateral. And the issues of economics, politics, and security are inseparably connected and therefore difficult to rank. Nuclear mutually assured destruction remains at the bottom of a Maslovian dystopia, but above it are the mutually assured disruptions of cybersecurity and the mutually assured confusions of disinformation. What in earlier times would be considered acts of war have evolved into gray-zone gambits. The security realm of hurt-without-victory has expanded, and to it can be added the weaponization of economics and politics. Economics and politics are themselves complex and interactive within their own realms. And then there are global questions of sustainability that at a minimum require parallel efforts by states.

Besides the multidimensional concerns of a multinodal world, there is the diffuse agency of the nodes themselves. In 2008 the GDP of the developing world exceeded that of the developed world for the first time since the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Meanwhile, communications, information, and logistics have facilitated a diffusion of connectivity (Baldwin 2016). Globalization has expanded the options of every actor. And while there are ebbs and redirections in the currents of globalization, the underlying connectivity is not reversible. Each node is the center of a located web of relationships within which it pursues its opportunities and reduces its risks. Since the relationships are with other autonomous agents they can be viewed as essentially horizontal, though each relationship is canted up or down by asymmetries of exposure, and each is made more or less intense by distance and other factors. The greatest

asymmetries of exposure are with the global powers, but even these are no longer simply vertical, hegemonic relationships.

A multinodal world is not a defective vertical world in which greater coercion is needed to achieve the same result. It is one in which the predominance of the horizontal dimension of connectivity is usually more salient than the vertical dimension of coercive authority (Qin 2023). While global powers—as well as every stronger power in an asymmetric relationship—still have the greater power to hurt, they are less able to coerce effectively, and their efforts to force a specific relationship into compliance are likely to have counterproductive collateral effects on their other relationships. Every agent has more possibilities of resisting, hedging, and developing alternatives.¹⁶ Some are more exposed to one or the other global power, but that dependency tends to heighten the priority of maintaining autonomy. There are many other asymmetries besides global ones: middle powers, regional subsystems, and more. Each actor must navigate a matrix of located asymmetric relationships according to its own interests and options.

While the world beyond hegemonic control is empowering to each agent, it is also one of bewildering vulnerability. The increase in one's own options is welcome; however, the increase in everyone else's options magnifies uncertainty. As Katzenstein (2022) points out, each must manage a relational jungle rather than tend a garden of discrete causes and effects. In a horizontal world, the reduction of uncertainty is the cardinal diplomatic task. The unknown future can be structured by each actor's network of stable relationships. Thus, despite the polarizing tendencies of global rivalry, most nonglobal actors will want to maintain positive relationships with both global powers. Beneath the global level, stabilizing local and regional relationships is also crucial. Thus, partnerships, regional institutions, and more general patterns of connectivity become vital in the effort to reduce uncertainty.

The strategic situation of Singapore can be used to illustrate the difference between the uncertainty dilemma faced by smaller countries in a multinodal context and the Cold War security dilemma. The dilemmas are similar in that awareness of vulnerability drives military preparedness. But the security dilemma imagines a situation of bilateral symmetry, while the uncertainty dilemma confronts multilateral asymmetry. Besides two-year compulsory military service, Singapore's per capita military budget in 2023 was exceeded only by Israel and the US, and its total defense budget was 26% larger than that of Indonesia (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2025). On the other hand, Singapore has also hedged against confrontation by developing cooperative relationships with its neighbors (Tan 2025). The Malaysian scholars Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Nur Shahadah Jamil

(2024, 10) define hedging as “*insurance-seeking* behavior to minimise risks, maximise returns and maintain fallback positions, primarily through active neutrality, inclusive diversification and prudently adaptive strategies” (emphasis in original). Singapore’s most dramatic case of hedging is the announcement in January 2025 by Malaysia and Singapore of the creation of the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone. The Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone is huge, five times the area of Singapore itself, and larger than Hong Kong and Shenzhen combined. By creating a shared growth center, Singapore achieves the hinterland it lost when it was expelled from Malaysia in 1965, and Malaysia benefits more directly from Southeast Asia’s neural center (Guild 2025). The rationale of the project, however, is not developmental optimism, but rather proactive concern about increased competition in an uncertain global economy (Walker 2025). Combinations of preparedness and hedging are also clear in Switzerland. Switzerland has universal but less demanding requirements of military service and a smaller per capita defense budget than Singapore, but it is well known for its concern for autonomy and caution in its institutional ties to its neighbors.

Partnerships are usually less dramatic than the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone. Partnerships are not alliances, but their formal displays of respect and their encouragement of connectivity increase the chances of a continuing relationship of mutual benefit. Vietnam’s comprehensive strategic partnerships with China, Russia, the US, India, Japan, and Australia, along with its membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are the opposite of the security provided by camp membership in the Cold War. Vietnam’s current bargaining position with each of its partners is strengthened by the diversity of its partnerships, and whatever crises the future might bring, Vietnam has access to, and presumptively friendly relationships with, the other major actors.

While the multinodal era may be fluid, the world system is not likely to return to a hegemonic era. Coercive diplomacy is not likely to be strategically successful in securing domination. However, continued diplomatic coercion could metastasize and produce a collective, securitized uncertainty dilemma. The most egregious recent example is the effect of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine on Europe. As global future prospects become more volatile, regional dynamics might produce tighter relationships in some cases and localized vortices of turmoil in others. Meanwhile, breaking the now 80-year-old taboo on the use of nuclear weapons is under active consideration in both the US (O’Doherty 2024; Sanger 2024) and Russia (Seddon 2024; Sokov 2024; Trenin, Avakyan, and Karaganov 2024). Schelling would want the risks of both escalation and proliferation to be taken more seriously.

Schelling’s Premises Reconsidered

The characteristics of the multinodal era require a rethinking of Schelling’s three premises: reliance on conflictual bargaining, the isolation of security concerns, and hegemonic capability. If these premises do not hold, then strategy must be rethought from the ground up. The new era promises greater international uncertainty, and it is delivering on its promise. Issues are more diverse and interactive, actors at all levels have more discretion, and although relational asymmetry remains important, coercive diplomacy is less effective, more costly, and more likely to be counterproductive. Meanwhile, the asymmetric rivalry between the US and China is fundamentally different from that between the US and the USSR.

The first premise of adversarial bargaining implies a transaction that maximizes one’s own benefit by constraining the behavior of the opponent. The high-risk game of chicken once played on lonely roads by some teenagers does have a certain resonance with adversarial bargaining in international relationships.¹⁷ But prudence would be more rational in both the teenage and the international cases, since each should consider the future that it is shaping (Kirshner 2022). Moreover, the heavy traffic in the multinodal arena confuses both the execution and the outcome of bilateral games. One could argue, for example, that the 2003 invasion of Iraq created opportunities for Iran to expand its regional influence.

Looking ahead from any specific transaction, the prospective future context in foreign affairs is one of unknown issues and valences among a field of known actors. Thus, the salient question is how one’s own current behavior might affect the likely behavior of others in an unknown future context. If a transactional “win” increases the likelihood of future actions against one’s interest, then squeezing the moment might not be wise. And while the hostile bargain is usually imagined as an event between two actors, its influence on others will be a significant part of its future effect. A hostile bargainer in a multinodal web should not ignore the reverberations of its transaction and the possible damage to the texture of its connections.

With the prospect of known interactors in unknown future circumstances, prudence would prioritize the encouragement of accessible and positive relationships. The wise first move in an indefinite series of games is cooperation (Axelrod 1984). In future-oriented international decision making there are manifold first moves, as well as opportunities for resets. It is rarely the case that two nations’ best interests are served by a sequence of bad chickens and bad eggs. Stabilizing positive relationships provides a structure for negotiating future uncertainties. As illustrated by Vietnam’s partnerships, the prioritization of relationships does not necessarily constrain bargaining within each relationship. Indeed, countervailing partnerships strengthen autonomy. Vietnam’s comprehensive

strategic partnerships with both the US and with China reduce its dependency on either and therefore enhance its bargaining position. A visit to Washington is matched by a visit to Beijing. Rather than simply winning transactions, relational rationality requires the preservation of one's autonomy combined with the cautious pursuit of one's interests.

Schelling's second premise, the dominance of security strategy over other concerns, seems to be the least applicable to today's diplomacy. Now everything is touted as a matter of national security. As Daniel Drezner (2024) has put it, in this century "the national security bucket has grown into a trough." With electronic vulnerabilities and terrorism, the exposure to intentional harm has increased, and obligations for defense abroad have become more complicated. In addition, any matter that can be described as a possible serious threat to national welfare—from artificial intelligence to quantum computing, to fentanyl, to deindustrialization, to climate change—is now called a threat to national security. The justification for national security's mission creep is that each issue, if neglected, will result in a major risk. While concerns about oversecuritization are justified, it cannot be denied that many vital issues now swim in the national security trough.

Although Schelling dealt with a simpler world, his bargaining approach to nuclear strategy is applicable to today's complexities. It was not based on establishing American invulnerability. Schelling's focus was on how to achieve aims and reduce risk by influencing the behavior of the opponent. With the USSR, this required a search for common interests, most importantly the avoidance of mutually assured destruction. Hence the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty was for him a major accomplishment, and the taboo on the use of nuclear weapons was a major miracle of tacit cooperation. However, since the end of the Cold War, the US notion of military security has drifted from bargained de-risking to the unilateral elimination of risk through invulnerability.¹⁸ Security is now seen as absolute, not negotiated, with the ultimate security being the plans for a "golden dome" of antimissile defenses (Cirincione 2025). Nuclear weapons remain a central concern, but as Schelling (1985) noted in a later writing, the treaty restrictions that emerged in the early seventies have deteriorated. Absolute security is in effect a return to the mentality prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The mentality of absolute security, combined with oversecuritization, creates an atmosphere of anxiety and isolation that increases risk rather than reducing it (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998). To the extent that a risk is mutual, Schelling would argue that bargaining is likely to be a more effective approach than competitive wall building. To the extent that a risk is general—in cyber security, for example—a rule-based regime of de-risking may be more feasible than attaining national immunity. Multilateral risk control is not easy, but in a multinodal world a

collaborative scheme is more likely to succeed than unilateral risk elimination. The unipolar moment has passed, and with it the efficacy of unilateral solutions.

The multiplication of national risk factors reflects a general evolution both of the number of significant national exposures and of their interaction. The desk of each country is crowded with important issues demanding attention. At least as important as the individual issues, however, is the general ecology of concerns. Migration is related to global inequality, to domestic chaos, to host-country politics, and to global warming. If "securitization" implies an isolated national approach to address one facet of an integrated problem, policies of risk reduction are likely to be tactical and ineffective in the long run. A more promising strategy would be one of desecuritization: the collaborative management of related causes and effects in their global context (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998).

The two corollaries of Schelling's third premise of hegemonic capability were, first, that coercive diplomacy could be effective, and second, that spheres of influence were exclusive hegemonic domains. Both were problematic even during the Cold War, and both need fundamental rethinking in a multinodal era. The first corollary, that credibility within a sphere of influence requires effective capabilities of deterrence and compellence—that is, of coercion—presumes an apex position in a vertical hegemonic order. It is the credibility of command. But command credibility is measured not by the power to hurt, but rather by the power to change behavior. In Robert Dahl's (1957) classic formulation, A causes B to do something that B would not otherwise do. In a world of greater agency, not only is it now more difficult to coerce, but the collateral consequences of coercion can render it counterproductive. In an increasingly multinodal world, the habitual American urge to defend its command credibility is reactive and tactical. As President Biden (2022) put it on a visit to the Middle East, "[w]e will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran."

The US still holds a position of central control in global financial and data systems (Farrell and Newman 2023). The US dollar and the US market are still indispensable. Thus, economic sanctions have become a primary tool of deterrence and compellence. Trump's threat to impose an additional 10% tariff on BRICS members because of their "anti-American policies" makes explicit the function of tariffs as a form of sanction (Politi and Leahy 2025). But sanctions are more effective as a tactic than as a strategy. As a tactic, they constrain the habituated connectivity of the global economy, and therefore the threat of sanctions can be a deterrent. Strategically, economic sanctions have long-term effects that are counterproductive for command credibility. First, sanctions underscore the difference of interests between the system maker and the system takers. Second, as a consequence, the evasion of sanctions is

endemic. Third, the sanctioned entity, and onlookers, are incentivized to de-risk. The sanctions placed on Mussolini and Hitler in the prewar 1930s brought them closer together and led to the development of indigenous substitute production (Mulder 2022). Lastly, sanctions add to the general costs and risks of participating in a US-dominated system. With 60% of developing countries currently experiencing some form of US sanctions, their alienation from US policy is understandable (Stein and Cocco 2024). The expansion of the BRICS group to 10 members and nine partners in 2024 is evidence of the growing consolidation of resistance to arbitrary sanctions and tariffs.

The general problem with maintaining command credibility in a multinodal era is that the implicit threat of “My way or the highway” is no longer applicable. The US has greater power than any prospective opponent, but effective coercion requires the absence of alternatives. Analogous to gunpowder, coercion requires compression as well as explosive capacity, and agents now have more space to hedge and dodge. China could respond mildly to the tariffs of the first Trump administration because it had ample conduits to US markets through third countries. Less evasion is possible with the second Trump administration’s wave of general tariffs, but China’s exports to the US are less than half of its exports to the rest of Pacific Asia (Workman 2025). And the risk for the US is considerable. The US may well have a difficult recovery from the recoil of a massive tariff policy aimed at others.

Of course, larger states and *a fortiori* global powers will assert their interests in relationships. But in a multinodal context the exercise of relative power is likely to be less effective, and its secondary effects might be counterproductive. Schelling’s basic bargaining approach is still relevant. His advice is to make threats responsive to the opponent’s behavior. Transposed to a multinodal framework, deterrence should be presented as a correction in a continuing relationship, and sanctions should be proportional and contingent rather than indefinite (Womack 2024). Meanwhile, other states want stability in their expectations, and the US has been central to global stability. To the extent that the interests of others converge with US interests, US leadership credibility remains possible. While leadership credibility involves more than the attractiveness of soft power, it is not simply the gleam on the sword (Womack 2005).

In contrast to command credibility’s reliance on coercion, leadership credibility relies on reassurance. Schelling (1966, 74) emphasizes the importance of assurance, and this is underlined by Pauly (2024). Assurance is necessary to make credible the contingency of a threat. “If you move, I shoot” implies the assurance that if you don’t move then I won’t shoot. Asymmetric reassurance is different from Schelling’s assurance. It is a general acknowledgement of respect for the autonomy of the counterpart (Womack

2013). In a multinodal context, leadership presumes a relationship between autonomous actors. Leadership empowers autonomy by advancing the interests of both; hegemony constricts autonomy by requiring compliance. Leadership also involves asymmetries of attention, initiative, and capabilities, but smaller actors in asymmetric relationships are allergic to actions that undermine their autonomy or endanger their core interests. The US embeddedness at the center of global order gives it a default advantage in global leadership, but ultimately its credibility as a leader is judged by the eye of the beholder, not by its own claims.

The second corollary, that of hegemonic spheres of influence, is as problematic as the first. A hegemonic sphere of influence is necessarily exclusive. A camp cannot serve two masters. But even without considering the rise of China, command and control are more difficult in a multinodal world. And given asymmetric rivalry with China, camp exclusivity is impossible. The US cannot produce what China produces at a comparable price and scale, and China cannot supplant the global political, economic, and security structure that the US has built. Both the US and China have quite different but overlapping nonhegemonic spheres of attention. Every other country is alert to its exposure to the global powers, but their attention does not imply automatic obedience, or even deference.

The different dimensions of the US and Chinese overlapping spheres of attention change the nature of global rivalry. Because each has the other as its greatest risk exposure, an adverse proportional change in the relationship is perceived as an increase in risk, even if a gain for one is not at the expense of the other. Thus, for example, an increase in China’s influence in Southeast Asia or an increase in the US’s influence in Europe seems to increase risk even though neither are hostile displacements. Countermeasures that attempt to expand one’s own sphere of positive attention may be productive; countermeasures that attempt to defend one’s own sphere by asserting exclusivity are likely to be counterproductive.

Putin and the Trap of Coercive Diplomacy

Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is the most egregious current example of the application of the diplomacy of violence characteristic of the Cold War. While the situation of Russia and its relationship to Ukraine are unique, the rationale of the invasion is consonant with Schelling’s premises and illustrates the trap of applying an inappropriate strategy in a multinodal era.

Putin’s strategic error began with his decision to invade Ukraine, not with the problems of its execution (Womack 2024). Clearly the failure to take Kyiv and the ensuing war and stalemate have made the invasion a catastrophic mistake, but why did it seem “a good idea at the time,” and what if Putin had been successful? If we imagine a

quick occupation of Kyiv and the installation of a puppet government, which was not an implausible expectation, what would have been the likely effects? While there would be for Putin the satisfaction of initial success, continued Ukrainian resistance to occupation would have been a major problem, and other former Soviet states would be alienated. Finland and Sweden would have joined NATO, and NATO itself would prepare against a greater Russian threat. Russia would become more dependent on China, and the militarization of the Russian socioeconomy would continue. All of these consequences were exacerbated by the failure of Russia's initial invasion, but from the first day Russia would have isolated itself.

Putin's strategic rationale can be fully explained by traditional Russian and Cold War thinking, but its inappropriateness for a multinodal era can be illustrated by applying Schelling's three premises. The Ukraine invasion was not simply a small war gone bad; it was an attempt to reestablish a hegemonic relationship in a post-hegemonic era.

With regard to Schelling's first premise of adversarial bargaining, it might seem that Putin's surprise attack was an exercise of brute force that preempted bargaining.¹⁹ But the purpose of the invasion was to make Ukrainian behavior conform to Russian wishes by means of Russia's capacity to hurt. In this it was similar to Russia's actions in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Unlike these small wars, however, the resistance capacities of Ukraine were far stronger, and the reaction of Europe and the US was more actively negative. Moreover, the event of the invasion preempted any long-term positive relationship with an autonomous Ukraine. Putin was aiming at regime change, but if regime change fails, it denies the possibility of a positive relationship. And as the history of Eastern Europe during the Cold War demonstrated, imposed regimes lack legitimacy. Politically, the threat of regime change stimulates desperate opposition not only from the regime, but from the entire polity whose familiar order is at risk.

The second premise, the decisiveness of security concerns, was quite different for Putin than it was in the 1960s. Nevertheless, he made an analogous error. Putin was of course aware that security actions would interact with economic relationships, but he assumed that the European dependence on Russian oil as well as Middle Eastern dependence on Russian and Ukrainian agricultural products would insulate Russia from serious economic repercussions. He also expected that China and India, among others, would not abide by sanctions. While Putin's expectations were not groundless, the intricacies of economic connectivity made him vulnerable to sanctions. If Putin's invasion had succeeded, the incentive to isolate Russia economically and politically would have been even greater. By filling what he mistook as a power vacuum, Putin would have created a large and lasting certainty

vacuum for Europe, and that would incentivize organized defense.

Basically, Putin's invasion securitized Russia domestically and in its external relations. While militarizing Russian production gives it the feverish warmth of mobilization, the long-term costs of concentrating on noncirculating products will be the neglect of the rest of the economy. And many of the young Russians who do not see a future for themselves in Fortress Russia have already gone elsewhere. Meanwhile, Russia's international relationships are also securitized. The calculi of its partners begin with the assessment of how their own security is affected by the invasion, then proceed to the effects of sanctions, and finally to the advantages to themselves offered by Russia's urgencies. Stalemate in Ukraine exacerbates these effects, but the act of invasion was itself the watershed.

The most telling of the premises that Putin shared with Schelling was that of the third one of hegemonic capability. Its first corollary was that the diplomacy of violence would be necessary and sufficient to establish command credibility. Ukraine was an inferior power, it failed to heed the lessons of 2014, and therefore it must be subjugated. The surprising strength of Ukrainian resistance demonstrated the increase in autonomous agency since the era of small wars, and the aid that Ukraine received from NATO, despite Ukraine's lack of membership, displayed the transformation of connectivity. The 2022 invasion did not have a "small war" moment. Instead, it was from the beginning a violation of a multinodal order.

Putin's attempt to reestablish command credibility also forfeited any opportunity for broader leadership credibility. The identification of credibility with the capacity for effective coercion could be seen as the tragic flaw of the Russian Empire, with Stalin (and now Putin) as worthy successors. The only firm relationship was a vertical one, and any mutual benefit was at the discretion of the tsar. Even in the best of times it would not have been easy for postcommunist Russia to establish leadership credibility with its periphery, and Russia's domestic implosion of the 1990s, coupled with the centrifugal temptations of Europe, made it impossible to reconstitute former Soviet relationships on the basis of Russia's role as a useful and nonthreatening center. The act of the invasion was the nail in the coffin for both forms of Russian credibility.

The second corollary of the premise of hegemonic capability was the establishment of an exclusive hegemonic sphere of influence. Since the USSR had built a sphere of influence of this sort in the ashes of World War II, it is understandable that Putin might seek to reestablish one. However, the pursuit of an exclusive sphere of influence in a multinodal era is necessarily self-isolating. Russia's relationship with North Korea results from their common interest in alleviating their mutual isolation rather than from Russia's desire for hegemonic control. Russia has attempted to rope China into the appearance of an

alliance, but China would be the greater power in the relationship. Belarus is Russia's only remaining client. Unlike China's production influence or American financial influence, there is no significant dimension of Russian global influence, and the possibility of establishing one has been negated by the attempt to regain hegemony in Ukraine. While a tactical victory in Kyiv might have been possible, strategic success was not.

Conclusion: Beyond Schelling

The underlying thesis of this analysis has been that the largely peaceful and largely economic transformations of this century have changed the texture of international relationships, and that therefore the rationale of foreign policy and international relations theory must be fundamentally reexamined. The focus has been on Thomas Schelling's *Arms and Influence* because it is the clearest expression of the Cold War rationale for coercive diplomacy.

As Putin's invasion of Ukraine has shown most clearly, coercive strategy is increasingly counterproductive in an era of greater agency and greater connectivity. Coercion destroys the possibility of mutually beneficial relationships, it produces undesirable political and economic consequences, and it cannot achieve a hegemonic sphere of exclusive influence. Putin's attempt to reverse history has failed, and this holds lessons for the US and China. The US is worried about the slippage of its hegemonic credibility. But nostalgic hegemonism provides poor counsel for a multinodal era. In the words of Sancho Panza, one cannot drive a nail into the wheel of fortune (Cervantes [1615] 2003, 579). The US must soberly differentiate its declining coercive credibility from its still extensive opportunities for leadership credibility. As a newcomer and as a former victim of coercive diplomacy, China is better positioned for credibility in the new multinodal era. But even though its success was not established by coercion, the credibility of its leadership can be undermined by arrogance and complacency (Womack 2013).

The enduring truth of Schelling's work is that he emphasizes influence. His error is that he assumes a vertical world in which arms are the only path to influence. That path was never perfect, and in the current era the terms of effective influence—of credibility—have changed from control to leadership. The global powers hold the attention of the world and therefore are in the default position of leadership. Competition for global leadership is not necessarily zero sum, as the 2016 collaboration on the Paris Climate Accords demonstrated. But the ultimate Cold War nightmare of global nuclear destruction remains, and the institutions and memories that limited its risk have faded. Arms flourish regardless of influence, and they retain the power to hurt regardless of victory.

Schelling's book was written for the US in the golden age of Cold War strategic realism. It embodied the common sense of international relations thinking for both the

US and the USSR. Beyond the great powers themselves, onlookers could use strategic realism as a script for interpreting the Cold War contest, and they might dream of their own rise to power. But to continue to merit the term "realism," thinking must adjust to new realities. The disparity of capacities in the asymmetric matrix of multinodal relationships tempts the stronger to bully the weaker at every level, but coercion is likely to be counterproductive and costly in terms of future relationships. Thus, the rethinking of international relationships is not simply a matter for great powers. Managing uncertainty is the primary strategic task for all in an era of connectivity and diffuse agency.

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Notes

- 1 The intellectual foil to Schelling's rationalist approach would be George Kennan's emphasis on an in-depth understanding of the internal dynamics of the Soviet context.
- 2 However, the Christmas bombing, codenamed Linebacker II, was not successful. It was brief because it was a costly, all-out effort (Asselin 2002, 127–54), and, contrary to Kissinger's (1979, 1303) claim, the result was little different from the October 1972 agreements (Haun and Jackson 2016).
- 3 Schelling's bargaining can be contrasted with the following statement of the head of the Strategic Air Command to a Rand analyst in 1960: "Look. At the end of the war, if there are two Americans and one Russian, we win!" (quoted in Kaplan 2009, 417–18).
- 4 The embeddedness of his thinking has been demonstrated empirically (Avey et al. 2022).
- 5 Two-thirds of the Google Scholar citations of *Arms and Influence* have occurred since 2008. While there are obvious problems with the sampling, it is clear that Schelling has not faded away. Current discourse on deterrence confirms his influence (Van Son 2024).
- 6 In Schelling's writings deterrence and compellence are the twin forms of coercion, but later discussions sometimes identify coercive diplomacy with compellence (George, Hall, and Simons 1971). In a series of hostile interactions, however, deterrence and compellence are often Siamese twins.

- 7 Schelling was in frequent contact with Stanley Kubrick during the making of *Dr. Strangelove* (Stillman 2008, 492).
- 8 Both deterrence theory (Gartzke and Lindsay 2024; Quackenbush 2011) and game theory (Yoder and Haynes 2025) have come a long way since Schelling, and both directions of development appear to add diversity and nuance.
- 9 However, as Farrell and Newman (2023) detail, thus far the US maintains control of some major choke-points of international connectivity.
- 10 Calculated from International Monetary Fund (2024) data. I have extended their forecast using their percentage estimates for 2026–29. Both projections are useful only in dramatizing economic asymmetry; neither is more accurate than the other. If the renminbi gained 30% on the dollar, China would reach nominal parity in 2031.
- 11 Posen uses the term “escalation dominance,” which I think is too simplistic for the complexities of a trade war (see Morgan et al. 2008, 15). But Posen demonstrates that trade deprivation is likely to hurt the US more than China.
- 12 Area experts on each side can shed their home shoes and step into those of the other side, but, in a transcultural version of Plato’s cave, they find it difficult to return and convince the home audience. As in Plato’s cave, there are also more popular “experts” who manipulate the shadows of the audience’s prejudices and fears.
- 13 It could be argued that the world order from roughly 1750 to 1820 was also multinodal. European governmental dominance was not quite consolidated. Control ambiguities were highlighted by American independence and the relocation of the Portuguese monarchy to Brazil in 1807–21, while the roles of the British, French, and Dutch trading companies added dimensional complexity (Dalrymple 2019; Smith 1776, 5:vii).
- 14 Beyond sovereign nodes there are nonsovereign agents in control of territory, most prominently Taiwan, as well as corporations, international governmental organizations, and nongovernmental organizations.
- 15 According to the International Monetary Fund (2024), the “emerging market and developing economies” in 2007 passed the aggregate GDP of advanced economies in PPP. Of course, China’s surge since 1980 is a large part of the story, but if China’s GDP is removed from the group, the rest without China will reach parity with advanced economies in 2025.
- 16 This is especially clear in Southeast Asia (Ba, Kuik, and Sudo 2016; Kuik 2024).
- 17 The game occurs when two people vying for a reputation for valor position their left-hand wheels (in the US) on the highway median strip and drive toward one another at high speed. The first to diverge is the “chicken.”
- 18 Andrew Bacevich (2023) rightly argues that the Manichean mentality of American security policy dates back to the beginnings of the Cold War, but in its current iteration vis-à-vis China it is without the balance of a George Kennan (Kennan 1997; Reeves 2024).
- 19 Besides negotiation, Schelling did argue for tacit bargaining through actions. The essence of hostile bargaining is winning—that is, forcing compliance.

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