Introduction

This is a book about themes familiar to any thinking person in the contemporary world – domination and subjection, war and peace, world order, cycles of power – but from a new perspective. Usually attention is drawn to the issues that produce the most heat and light: the risks of major war, the competition of great powers, and the morality of domination. Here, attention is focused first on those unexciting international relationships in which the smaller side cannot threaten the larger, and yet the larger cannot force its preferences on the smaller at a cost acceptable to itself – asymmetric international relationships. But the logic of asymmetric relationships in world affairs is not merely a logic of the sidelines. Most international relationships are asymmetric, and the apex of contemporary asymmetry is the post-2008 global situation. Ultimately, the fate of even a superpower rests on its management of asymmetric relationships.

The perspective of each state is situated within horizons set by its capabilities and location. In an asymmetric relationship, the perspectives diverge. The stronger side has proportionally less at stake in the relationship, and this will affect its perceptions and behavior. The weaker side has more at stake and also has more concerns about how the relationship might change. The stronger side wants a relationship that stays “in its place,” and therefore it expects deference from the weaker. The weaker side is concerned about its vulnerability to the stronger’s greater power, and therefore it requires assurances that its autonomy will be respected. Even in a normal, nonthreatening situation, the smaller will tend to game the system and the larger will try to systematize the game. This basic, microsystemic situation is the starting point of asymmetry theory.

Of course, asymmetry of capabilities is not the only factor affecting international relationships. If we contrast U.S. relations with Canada and with Cuba, differences in regime and ideology account for more than the differences in disparity. Sometimes a larger framing of the bilateral relationship – both parties in the same Cold War camp, for example – plays an important role.
The changes in the relationship between Germany and Austria over the past hundred years cannot be understood without taking into account the larger European context. But asymmetry still matters. Canada’s relationship with the United States is different from its relationship with Australia, and Cuba’s relationship with Mexico is different from its relationship with the United States. In some instances asymmetry is the predominant factor in international interactions, and wherever asymmetry exists it will be an important structural factor. The larger side is less aware of asymmetry’s effects, and therefore Americans are the least aware of its effects – but ask a Canadian, or a Cuban. This book does not claim that asymmetry explains everything. Rather, it tries to answer the question, “What difference does asymmetry make?”

Of course, there are situations and time frames in which the difference that asymmetry makes is simply, “you win, I lose,” or even more simply, “I live, you die.” While these outcomes do not require asymmetry – Thomas Schelling and terrorists agree that it is easier to destroy than to create – having the longer sword or the larger army usually helps. As Schelling points out, the primary use of a preponderance of power in international relations is to compel compliance by others rather than to destroy, and “coercion by threat of damage requires that our interests and that of our opponents not be absolutely opposed.” But it is much easier to compel a transaction – “Give me your money!” than it is to compel a relationship – “Be my slave!” And the longer the time frame the more the difficulties of domination increase. Why? Asymmetry theory addresses the interaction of power and vulnerability.

It would be strange indeed if the complexities of asymmetric relationships were as important as this book maintains and no one had ever noticed them before. It can be seen in the poetry of Lao Zi (circa fifth to sixth century BC), the founder of Daoism:

The large state can win the small one
   By taking the lower position
The small state can win the large one
   By taking the lower position
   . . . But the large state should be more willing
   To take the lower position.²

A. O. Hirschman, an always eloquent observer, made a seminal argument in 1942 about the importance of economic dependency creating the basis for Hitler’s political power in Europe. But thirty-five years later, he made a self-criticism of his assumption that economic asymmetry simply created political dominance. On the basis of American experience in Latin America, he argued for a more dialectical viewpoint:

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A country whose trade or investment is dominated by ties to a large and rich country is, at some point, likely to devote its attention with single-minded concentration to this uncomfortable situation and to attempt to loosen or cut these ties. But the large rich country which carries on only a small portion of its international economic relations with the country it dominates is normally preoccupied with its more vital other interests, for example, with its relations to the other large powers. Hence the basic economic disparity generates a disparity of attention, or at least of high-level attention... and this disparity now favors the dependent country: that country is likely to pursue its escape from domination more actively and energetically than the dominant country will work on preventing this escape. The British Empire is said to have been acquired in a fit of absent-mindedness. However that may be, it seems a more convincing proposition that empires, formal or informal, tend to crumble that way.

Hirschman is certainly not recanting his earlier work and denying the importance of trade dependency for smaller countries. Indeed, it is the vividness of dependency that creates the determination to modify its effects. But Hirschman does not pursue this new insight. His corrective prefatory essay is entitled, “Beyond Asymmetry.” This book proposes a systematic analysis of the effects of asymmetry, a general theory of asymmetry.

Symmetry is a general theory in that it is a vantage point for analyzing all asymmetric relationships. However, the intended contribution is not an explanatory key that makes asymmetric relationships predictable, but rather an interpretive model. It calls attention to the material disparities in relationships and their implications for perception and behavior. By doing so, it addresses a blind spot in most thinking about international relations: the gulf between the two contrary but common assumptions that all states are Westphalian equals and that power prevails. Adding this dimension should make our thinking about relational interactions more complex rather than less. To use Isaiah Berlin’s metaphor, I hope to contribute to a better breed of foxes rather than to introduce a new species of hedgehog.

Asymmetric relationships are by definition unequal, but they are far from constituting a simple pecking order of domination. As the United States has discovered in Iraq and elsewhere, it often happens that a larger power is quite capable of defeating the organized forces of a smaller power and yet it cannot impose a unilateral solution to the conflict. Its armies are victorious but, as hostility continues, the promise of pacification withers and is replaced by the frustration of stalemate. Proportionally, the suffering is greater on the weaker side. It struggles on, even though it cannot force its will on the stronger. It hopes

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that continued resistance will induce the stronger to leave. Every stronger and every weaker state has had experiences of this sort. Vietnam has been the nemesis of France, the United States, and China in the twentieth century, and in turn has been frustrated in Cambodia. Diplomatic common sense regarding the desirability of peace and the uncertain outcomes of hostility are founded as much on such memories of frustration and resistance as they are on the possibility of nuclear annihilation and the contests of great powers.

Although the basic unit of analysis of asymmetry theory is the bilateral relationship between stronger and weaker, this vantage point eventually requires a reconceptualization of multilateral, regional, and global relations. Each bilateral relationship is affected by its broader international context, but more importantly, the same characteristic differences of perspective that shape bilateral relations are also involved in more complex international relationships. The possibility of simultaneous interactive effects in a triangular relationship, the simplest of multilateral configurations, raises the calculus of consequences to dizzying heights of speculation, encouraging the formation of conditional relationships—alliances, for example—that attempt to control uncertainty by precommitting the participants to certain courses of action. At the regional level, patterns of asymmetric relationships create situations of regional leadership for stronger states, but there is the further complication of extraregional relations. In the post-Cold War world, the global level is the ultimate venue of asymmetric relations, and also the most extreme instance of the divergence of national perspectives. I argue in Chapter 6 that since 2008, the world order is becoming “multinodal,” that is, a matrix of states that are increasingly exposed to one another and yet the larger ones are less able to dominate the smaller. Thus, the management of asymmetric relationships becomes especially important.

ASYMMETRY’S ENDURING REALITY

Contrary to the opinions of a number of distinguished analysts, the ability of weaker nations to outlast and frustrate the objectives of stronger ones is not a recent phenomenon, though it has become more common in the past hundred years. The most notable Vietnamese achievement in this regard was not its recent successes against France and the United States, but rather the forcing of the Ming Dynasty’s withdrawal from Vietnam in 1427 after twenty years of occupation. Similarly, Hapsburg Spain’s granting of independence to the Netherlands in 1648 was the outcome of eighty years of asymmetric struggle. Even an apparent victory of might over weakness, such as the consolidation of British control over Ireland under Elizabeth I, may contribute to an alienation of identity that in the long term expresses itself through independence.

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Of course, if an existing polity has a loose and predatory relationship to its population then the people might be indifferent to its demise. In any case it certainly happens that the strong sometimes prevail and the weak are permanently subjugated, incorporated, scattered, or reduced to an insignificant remnant. The long tapestry of history appears to present many cases of this sort, in part because of the very length of the tapestry. But it will be argued here that it is not a newfound self-restraint or graciousness on the part of the strong that accounts for the better fortunes of the weak in the twentieth century. If relative power were the key to victory, it might seem that the weaker could prevail only if the stronger had one hand tied. But asymmetry of power tends to produce asymmetry of commitment; the weak have more reason to resist than the strong have interest to dominate. In both domestic and foreign affairs, protracted popular resistance has been the seedbed of the morality of governance. According to Bertrand Russell, “without rebellion, mankind would stagnate and injustice would be irremediable.”

Nevertheless, the point of asymmetry theory is not to argue that relative power is illusory and that strong and weak are equal. Rather the opposite. Precisely because the weaker are more at risk in a relationship, there are fundamental differences in mutual perception and interaction. An action by the stronger that is intended to be a limited sanction can create an emergency situation for the weaker. The fact of the sanction, amplified by the knowledge of the greater capabilities behind it, can produce a sense of threat to the autonomy and even identity of the weaker. When one is poked by an 800-pound gorilla, the image of what might happen next easily overwhelms the fact that so far it was only a poke. The reality of power differences in relationships is the object of attention in asymmetry theory, and this reality is considerably more complicated than is ordinarily assumed.

HEGEMONY AND ASYMMETRY

The perspective of asymmetry provides a new vantage point for viewing grand historical cycles of hegemony. Hegemonic cycles are usually analyzed with the unexamined presumption that power prevails. As Robert Gilpin summarizes the realist view:

A state is compelled within the anarchic and competitive conditions of international relations to expand its power and attempt to extend its control over the international system. If a state fails to make this attempt, it risks the possibility that other states will increase their relative power positions and will thereby place its existence or vital interests in jeopardy.

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The strongest is displaced by the challenger, and the only interesting question is how the challenger got strong enough (or the loser weak enough) for that to happen. By contrast, asymmetry theory can ask questions about when and how power prevails, and whether the challenge of sustaining an existing world order is simply a question of preserving a strength advantage against challengers or a more complex question of sustaining a generally acceptable world order.

If relative power is a problematic and interactive relationship, then the study of hegemonic cycles should move beyond a natural history of uneven development to consider how complex international orders are sustained. Although I dare not plunge into the depth of historical detail exemplified by Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, I agree that the relative capabilities of states are shaped by economic, technological, and social factors, and that the relative capabilities of states are fundamental to their interrelationships. But the more powerful are not omnipotent, and the less powerful are not impotent. The opportunity for leadership created by relative power will be sustained or shortened by whether other political communities feel reassured or feel threatened by the hegemon. “Imperial over-stretch” is determined as much by the resistance of the smaller communities as it is by the muscles of the imperial arm. Certainly cycles occur, but our interest lies in how the management of asymmetric relationships can shorten or prolong the existing matrix of power. Cyclical theories concentrate on the coming of the next challenger; here, attention is focused on the prerequisites of sustainable leadership.

The most impressive example of sustainable asymmetric leadership was the traditional Chinese Empire. The West little appreciates how much the Chinese Empire’s success was due to its developing a lively sense of the limits of its preponderant power and its willingness to accommodate the interests of smaller states in peace and mutual recognition. As a result, the Chinese Empire was resilient, springing back after periods of severe internal strife and external disruption. Such resilience has no place in cyclical theories: a broken hegemon should not be able to be fixed. Of course, in the nineteenth century, the Chinese Empire and polity were ground into shards by the advance of Western imperialism. Traditional leadership was sustainable only to a point, and we will analyze the self-limiting flaws of traditional asymmetric leadership as well as its virtues. By the same token, however, perhaps the world has now outgrown the utility of the modern Western virtues, so prized by contemporary analysts, of restless competition and striving for domination. We are now in an interconnected world in which the central figure is still the United States, though China is approaching a comparable economic mass. The fundamental problem of sustainable asymmetric leadership is not that of preventing the next

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challenger, but rather of preventing a fatal alienation of interests between the current leader or leaders and everyone else.

The challenge has been heightened by the crisis of global economic uncertainty that began in 2008. At its root, the challenge is not rising China but globalization itself, which renders impossible the exclusive alliances that undergirded Cold War bipolarity. Sustainable leadership is not a formula for eternal peace; it does not solve the problem of asymmetry. Rather, it takes the world matrix of asymmetric relationships as a normal condition and sees as its task the negotiated management of differences in a context of mutual respect. It may well be the case that, from the perspective of future centuries, we will appear to be at a certain phase in a certain cycle. However, to this generation it makes a great deal of difference whether world peace lasts another hundred years, another twenty years, or only another two years. And it should be the business of this generation to make a positive difference.

DEFINITIONS OF ASYMMETRY

Given the vast differences in capabilities among nations and the tendency for the disparities to remain stable, at least in the short term, it is not difficult to develop a commonsense, descriptive definition of asymmetric international relations. A bilateral relation is asymmetric when there is a clear and relatively stable disparity between the capabilities of the states involved and yet the disparity is not overwhelming. Most relationships between states would fit into this category. Obvious examples would be the United States and Canada, the United States and Cuba, Mexico and Guatemala, Brazil and Argentina, Germany and Austria, South Africa and Mozambique, India and Pakistan, and so forth. Whatever is claimed to be true concerning asymmetric relationships should be true of all of these and similar relationships.

A World of Disparities

While nations have many different capabilities and any of them can be involved in international interactions, population and Gross National Income (GNI) provide convenient, bottom-line comparisons for demographic and economic disparities. Population is a fundamental determinant of a country’s scale, while overall productivity is the basis of its deployable resources. While in Chapter 6 I will differentiate between demographic power based on population size and technological power based on per-capita productivity, population and GNI are adequate for our current purpose of illustrating the extent of asymmetry.

9 “GNI” is the World Bank’s new term for what is essentially gross national product (GDP). In the following tables I am using the World Bank’s nominal estimates of productivity in current U.S. dollars for my calculations.
A quick glance at world figures confirms the impression of significant differences. In order to stabilize our adjectives, we term a “clear” disparity one in which the larger exceeds the smaller by one-half (the smaller is 67 percent of the larger), a “great” disparity if the larger is double the smaller (the smaller is 50 percent of the larger), and an “overwhelming” disparity if the larger is ten times the smaller (the smaller is 10 percent of the larger).

By these standards there is no shortage of international disparity. In terms of population, only two states, China and India, have an overwhelming disparity with the world average population of 32.4 million, although the United States comes close, and another eighteen have a great disparity. But at the other end of the spectrum, seventy-one states have a population of less than half the average, and another eighty-one have populations of less than one-tenth. In terms of GNI, three countries, the United States, China, and Japan, had an overwhelming disparity with the world average GNI of $3.82 billion in 2011, and another fifteen were more than double the average. But thirty-six were on the small end of a great disparity with the average, and more than a hundred produced less than ten percent of average. Indeed, there are only twenty-five states not in an asymmetric relation with the population average, only seventeen with the GNI average, and only four states are members of both “symmetric” groups.

Of course, the full UN data includes many microstates and nonsovereign territories. If we restrict our count to the top one hundred states in each category, which include 96.4 percent of world population and 98.2 percent of world GNI, the asymmetrical distributions are different but still impressive.

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Derived from World Bank, World Development Indicators, accessed February 2014. The GNI set includes 190 units; the population set includes 214 units.

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Calculated from previous table.
China and India remain overwhelming in population compared to the average, and recently China joined the United States in leaping over the threshold of ten times the average GNI. However, eleven states have a great disparity in GNI. At the lower end of the scale the disparities are more remarkable. Sixty-three states have less than half the average population, and GNI is even more skewed, with one-third of states having less than 10 percent of the average GNI. There are few states close to the average in either category, and only two, Turkey and Iran, are in both average groups. And there are significant asymmetries among the “above average.” There is a great disparity in population between India, the second highest, and the United States, the third highest. In GNI, the U.S. economy is twice as large as the runner-up, China. While it is true that most international relationships will not be with “average” states – how could they be with so few – it is even more obvious that there exists a broad field for asymmetric relations.

Given that the top fifty world economies produce 93 percent of the global GNI and the fifty most populous states contain 87 percent of the global population, the case can be made for further restricting our general survey of asymmetry. There are costs. Familiar countries like Peru and Hungary do not make the GNI cutoff, and Australia is number 51 in population. Serbia, a focal point of global attention in the 1990s, is number 80 in GNI and number 99 in population. But as Table I.3 shows, disparity still reigns among the top fifty.

China and India are still the overwhelming heavyweights in population, as is the United States in productivity. Indeed, California’s economy alone would be in ninth place at 2 trillion dollars in 2011, and the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh with 199 million people would nudge out Brazil for fourth largest country, while the rest of India would still be in second place. Even though the bottom category of overwhelmingly small drops out, only seven economies and nine populations are close to the average. But perhaps the most important indicator of the extent of asymmetry is that twenty-one states are in one of the “top fifty” lists but not on the other.

While these tables are sufficient evidence of the prevalence of international asymmetry, we could strengthen the argument by approaching the empirical question of disparity from a different angle. Out of the abundance of possible large–small dyads that the charts suggest, the significant dyads are likely to be

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Calculated from previous table.
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among neighbors or to involve at least one large state. Distant small–small dyads are likely to be spotty. For example, Cambodia’s relationship to Laos, China, and the United States are interactive, but it does not have an exchange of embassies with Nicaragua. As Robert Jervis notes, “A book on Afghan-Bolivian relations would be short.” Asymmetric relationships are thus an even greater percentage of significant pairs.

The strength of a descriptive definition of asymmetry is that it gives us something real to point to. Its weaknesses are, first, that however clear the big middle of asymmetric relations might be, categorization raises boundary issues, and multiple measures raise questions of different sorts of asymmetry. For instance, in the relationship between China and Japan, do population and economic development balance each other out, or is it a case of countervailing asymmetries? A second weakness is that the empirical search for effects of asymmetry on international relations might be limited to fairly gross final outcomes. Perhaps, for instance, relations of great asymmetry have more (or fewer) wars than more symmetric ones, but it is also possible that a similar mechanism could produce different outcomes in different circumstances, or could produce modulations in outcomes to which a gross measure such as war/no war would not be sensitive. A more analytical definition is necessary that, by assuming a logical rather than an empirical coherence in the phenomena, focuses on the mechanism of asymmetrical interaction rather than on the scale of disparity.

An Analytic Definition of Asymmetry

I offer the following analytical definition of asymmetry. An asymmetric relationship is one in which the smaller side is significantly more exposed to interactions than the larger side because of the disparity of capabilities, and yet the larger is not able to dictate unilaterally the terms of the relationship. Disparity makes a difference. The positions are not transposable. The smaller side cannot challenge the larger side and have a reasonable hope of victory, and it is proportionally more exposed even in peaceful interactions. Sometimes David vanquishes Goliath, but it is remembered as an exception. I use the term “exposure” rather than “vulnerability” because the opportunities as well as the risks of interaction are more significant and vivid for the weaker side. However, the smaller side’s capability to resist the unilateral preferences of the larger side exceeds the resources that the larger side is willing to commit to enforce its preferences. Of course, the larger state is sometimes tempted to try, and may succeed for a time, but it is likely to become frustrated because of the protracted resistance of the smaller side.