The basic conclusion I draw from these papers is simple: great powers -- including those countries and groups of nations that aspire to be great powers -- have choices. They are sufficiently powerful that the international system, although constraining their freedom of action, does not entirely determine their behavior. They can choose what kind of power they wish to develop, and can define the role they want to play in the international system. Because they have choices, their foreign policies are the subject of domestic debate, over goals, strategies, or tactics. And because they have power, great powers sometimes have the leeway to make the wrong choices. Indeed, one operational definition of power is the ability to get away with making mistakes – sometimes quite serious ones – without suffering consequences as disastrous as would befall less powerful states. More than weaker states, great powers can be prone to folly, or at least to the suboptimal definition or pursuit of their national interests.

**Having choices**

Great powers and aspiring powers have the ability to define their goals and strategies in international affairs. They can choose to act on a regional stage, or can stake a claim to being global players. They can define their objectives with greater or lesser ambitions: to defend the existing international order and their position within it (to be a status quo power), to seek to restore a position or to regain territory that they once had but had subsequently lost (to be a revanchist or irredentist power), to alter the structure of international regimes or the distribution of power within them (to be a revisionist power), to transform other states within the system (to engage in what some Americans now call transformational diplomacy), or to overthrow the existing system and those states that occupy a leading role within it (to be a revolutionary power).

These choices have been available to actors in international systems for centuries, even millennia. But in the more complex world of today, there are further choices. Major powers and aspiring powers can choose what kinds of power to develop. In today’s world, some define themselves primarily as military powers. Others see themselves as economic powers. Still others seem themselves acting as mediators or facilitators, or serving as thought leaders or problem solvers, on various international issues. In other...
words, they can differentially develop their hard power, their “sticky” power,† or their soft power.

For example, the Soviet Union was, in its last decades, primarily a military power, with some residual ideological influence. Its successor, Russia, is seeking to become an economic power, drawing largely on its energy resources, with some residual military capability. Since World War II, Japan has predominantly been an economic power – the first modern “trading state”‡ – but more recently has seen the need to develop military power and diplomatic influence as well. Over the same period, the U.S. has been an all-round power, but some believe that its economic power and soft power are in decline, at least in relative terms, making today it primarily military power. China is attempting to rise on all three dimensions, although its ability to do so in a sustained way is still in doubt.

How nations develop and maintain their economic power is a particularly interesting issue, and one about which the papers say too little. Here, too, nations have choices. To what extent do they see themselves as sources of natural resources, manufacturing platforms, commercial hubs, financial nodes, or centers of scientific and technological innovation? And, in a world where technology transfers quickly, human resources can be developed relatively rapidly, and communications and transportation costs are low, how do the advanced economies maintain their comparative advantage vis-à-vis aspiring emerging markets?

Major powers can also define their power relative to a growing number of international regimes, including both international norms and formal international institutions. They can choose to accept existing regimes and work within then, to change existing international norms and institutions in either modest or more radical ways, or even to build new institutions that will supplement or even replace the existing institutional order. They can assume the responsibilities of strengthening those organizations and enforcing international norms, or they can act as free-riders, benefiting from what those organizations and norms provide while doing little to uphold them.

And nations still possess, in the geopolitical sphere, the same choices among national strategies that they have traditionally enjoyed. They can align with other powers, or remain neutral. Toward strong powers they can either bandwagon or balance. With regard to equal powers they can cooperate, confront, or hedge. In dealing with weaker powers, they can be a benign supporter, a more passive protector, or an aggressive hegemon. They can seek to exercise power unilaterally, in collaboration with other like-minded states, or through institutions.

† The phrase “sticky power” comes from Walter Russell Mead. See, “America’s Sticky Power,” *Foreign Policy*, March-April 2004, pp. KOMING.

Making choices

The papers suggest that some of the major powers – especially those of long standing – have been debating their choices for decades. Japan, for example, has long debated whether to be a more powerful independent power, less aligned with the United States; a “normal” multidimensional power that remains a close American ally; a modest “middle power,” relying on the U.S. for protection; or a pacifist power that plays a neutral role in geopolitics but that may try to promote international development. Similarly, debate in the US revolves around the familiar choices of whether to build international institutions that would both amplify and constrain American power, whether promoting democracy should be a key international objective, whether to regard the US as an exceptional power or as more of an ordinary one, and whether to maintain extensive engagement with the rest of the world or to withdraw into relative isolation.

Fundamental choices like these sometimes have deep epistemological roots. In fact, what is fascinating about international politics is that the same analytical choices made by scholars (whether to be realists or liberals) are also made by policymakers and ordinary citizens. Like scholars of international relations, some find the political systems and political values of other powers to be extremely important, others regard them as far less significant than their national capabilities and national interests. Like foreign policy analysts, some policymakers and citizens believe in the efficacy of international norms and institutions in constraining and guiding international behavior, while others believe that, at the end of the day, the perceived interests of powerful states are what ultimately determine the future of the international system.

The papers also show, however, that in some powers the choices are far more tactical in nature. Russia, China, and India presently appear to have little doubt about their overall strategy: All three of them are dominated by realist thinkers, who want to gain (or regain) a role as a major power in their region, if not globally. The debates are over policies toward specific countries and specific problems. Russians debate policies toward China and Iran. Chinese debate whether they can be a regional power or a global power, whether they should seek to transform international institutions or work within them, and whether they should engage in hard or soft balancing of the United States. Indians debate whether to align with the United States, or pursue a more multidimensional foreign policy. But these are debates over tactics, not strategy.

The resolution of such domestic disputes over foreign policy is thus a major element in shaping the foreign polices of major and aspiring powers. Sometimes there can be a relatively enduring compromise, and thus considerable consistency in the country’s foreign policy. But in other cases, such as the United States, there is no “Goldilocks Solution,” and instead foreign policy tends to cycle among the most viable options. The two aspiring powers that are actually coalitions of nation-states – the EU and ASEAN – have a particular problem in defining and sustaining a coherent foreign policy, since the views of their member states are divergent, and none of the powerful members wishes to subordinate its preferences to others.
Making wise choices or foolish choices

If nations have the ability to make choices, then it logically follows that their choices may be either relatively wise or relatively foolish. The overly ambitious may define objectives that are beyond their nation’s capability to achieve, particularly if those objectives conflict with the fundamental national interests of others. The excessively naïve may assume that international regimes and institutions provide more protection than they do, or overestimate the reliability of allies on whom they depend for support. The wise understand their comparative advantage, promote it assiduously, define their objectives appropriately, and craft strategies effectively. They also accurately anticipate the ways in which other states will respond to their initiatives.

Not only are choices wise or foolish, but they do not always maximize the influence of the actor in question. The papers show that some countries, such as today’s China, “punch above their weight” in international affairs, because they define their objectives in ways that coincide with the interests of others, and know how to use their capabilities to best advantage. Others, like Japan until quite recently, “punch below their weight,” in that they set their goals very modestly, refrain from developing their capabilities to their full potential, or fail to define and operationalize effective diplomatic or military strategies. Actors that are coalitions of nation-states, such as the EU and ASEAN, are particularly prone to “punch below their weight,” since their energies are devoted to the task of building their supra-national institutions.

These outcomes depend, of course, on the quality of foreign policy judgment in each power – not only of leaders, although that is clearly of fundamental importance, but also of officials and the academic community as well. And that depends not only on the intrinsic quality of scholars and diplomats, but also on the willingness and ability of political leaders to draw on their knowledge and take their advice.

The challenge for America

These papers suggest that, despite all the talk of a “unipolar moment” after the end of the Cold War, the United States is more likely to face a multipolar world, composed at least of the eight other actual and aspiring powers described in these essays. This poses a challenge for America. If we assume that we are the sole superpower – at the head of the greatest empire in human history since Rome – we may find that our relative capabilities are not sufficient to fulfill our ambitions. Conversely, given the fact that so many of the aspiring powers come from the former Communist world and from the developing world – China, India, Iran, Brazil, Russia, ASEAN – we may also find that the international

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§ Other nations not analyzed here, such as Egypt, Germany, Nigeria, and South Africa, may also become aspiring powers. All three of these countries – in addition to Brazil, India, and Japan -- are regarded as candidates to become permanent members of an enlarged U.N. Security Council.
organizations created in the immediate post-World War II era, particularly the United Nations and the Bretton Woods organizations, do not provide as firm a restraint on international behavior of the rising powers as we might hope.

Assessing the capabilities and intentions of the other powers will prove difficult. Capabilities are more diverse, and depend increasingly on the domestic vitality of the countries that wield them. Intentions can change over time, sometimes rapidly, and as noted above can be transformed by domestic controversies within each country. Forecasts will be controversial, since they will be rooted in differing assumptions about the drivers that shape international relations and the foreign policies of individual states. The heated debates in the U.S. over the longer-term goals and capabilities of China, India, and Russia are examples of the kind of analytical uncertainties the U.S. will face in the decades ahead.

As noted above, power can be defined as the ability to make foolish choices and suffer modest consequences. But if the U.S. is likely to face a more multipolar world, in which our power declines at least in relative terms, the consequences of folly are likely to become more and more severe, in relative if not absolute terms. We may not suffer a decline in our absolute international standing, but we may experience a loss relative to other established and aspiring powers that use their resources more wisely than we do.

That sobering fact has two implications: First, we would be well advised to maintain our capabilities across all dimensions of power, avoiding the dangers of becoming, like the former Soviet Union, a one-dimensional military power in a world where economic power, diplomatic resources, and cultural attractiveness are of increasing importance. Second, we also need to develop more extensive knowledge about international affairs – knowledge about how the world actually is, rather than how we would prefer it to be -- and then utilize that knowledge effectively in our national decision-making process. If folly is the result of poor choices by countries that are weaker than they realize, the way for America to avoid folly is not only to maintain its comprehensive national strength, but also to increase the wisdom of its foreign policy.