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The Military Superiority Thesis and the Ascendancy of Western Eurasia in the World System*

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ONE of the more intriguing historical and theoretical questions is how it was possible for an area often considered, rightly or wrongly, to be a peripheral backwater, such as western Eurasia, to ascend to a predominant position over the rest of the world between roughly 1500 and 1900. One succinct answer is suggested by Geoffrey Parker: “[The] . . . sustained preoccupation of European states with fighting each other by land and sea had at length paid handsome dividends. Thanks above all to their military superiority, founded upon the military revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Western nations had managed to create the first global hegemony in History.”¹ The answer is extremely parsimonious. The West was able to conquer the rest of the world thanks primarily to its edge in military technology. This edge had begun to emerge as early as the sixteenth century as a result of the intensive warring propensities of the region. The appeal of such an apparently simple explanation is undeniable—even though Parker’s explanation is actually less simple than it appears at first blush. Moreover, the evident appeal is bolstered by the fact that Western actors often did enjoy—sometimes in ways that were demonstrated quite dramatically—various forms of military superiority over non-European

*I am indebted for critical comments to Jeremy Black, George Modelski, and two anonymous reviewers.

¹ Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 154.

opponents. The problem lies not so much in determining whether or not one side had military superiority. The real question is how much credit should be given to military technological advantages in accounting for the rise of the West. The military superiority thesis bestows explanatory primacy on one side's coercive advantage. While we must not dismiss the relevancy of coercive advantages, it is doubtful that European military might explains quite as much as the proponents of the thesis would have us believe. At best, military superiority was only one of several important factors. But it can also be argued that some of these other factors actually were more critical to the ascendancy of western Eurasia.

Other factors include most prominently the relative vulnerability of the targets of expansion, the interrelated need for local allies to make military victories on land possible, and the evolution of a global political economy structured increasingly to favor European interests. In the absence of local political vulnerabilities and allies, it is most improbable that European military advantages would have sufficed in the 1500–1800 period. If both these factors were essential to establishing facilitative contexts for the exercise of coercive advantages, target vulnerability and local allies are at least as important as military superiority, if not more so. If it can also be demonstrated that in some cases the military superiority exhibited by the Europeans was not due to early modern revolutions in military technology, the military superiority interpretation will have been shown to require even further discounting. Finally, an emphasis on one side's coercive edge in acquiring territorial control tends to overlook the macroevolution of a global political economy increasingly dominated by some west Europeans. Ultimately, this macroevolution is a more important key to the finite ascendancy of the European region within the world economy than is military superiority.

After clarifying the nature of the military superiority thesis, and, in particular, Geoffrey Parker's version, five important cases (Portuguese imperial expansion in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, the Spanish conquests of the Aztecs and the Incas, the Dutch involvement in Indonesia, and the British involvement in India) are reviewed with an eye toward assessing the comparative roles and significance of European military superiority, target vulnerability, local alliances, and evolution of the global political economy. The general impression that emerges from these quick case reviews is that European military superiority was clearly not the key variable in accounting for the emergence of the European region to military, political, economic, and cultural predominance in the world system. Military superiority, at best,

was only one of several interactive factors and, by itself, has quite limited explanatory powers. Moreover, too much emphasis on military superiority detracts from the ability to juggle systematically the multiple factors at play in the ascendancy of western Europe and, potentially, other regions in the world system.

PARKER'S MILITARY SUPERIORITY THESIS

A large number of people have written about military revolutions in early modern Europe. This is not the place either to review this material, to question the utility of its revolutionary conceptualization, or to challenge its various periodizations and claims about specific weapons systems. Suffice it to say that analysts continue to debate whether and how changes in military technology had an impact upon early modern Europe.² However, the extension of some of these arguments to the ascendancy of Europeans over non-Europeans has been subject to considerably less dispute. One reason is that a strong articulation of the thesis appeared only fairly recently in the form of Geoffrey Parker's *Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800*, published in 1988 and revised in 1996. Most of Parker's critics so far seem to be more comfortable focusing on European materials. Another reason for the easy acceptance of the thesis is that the mili-

² For arguments about the European military revolutions, see the following: Jeremy Black, *A Military Revolution? Military Change and European Society, 1550–1800* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1991); Black, *European Warfare, 1660–1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Clifford J. Rogers, ed., *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995); and William R. Thompson and Karen Rasler, "War, the Military Revolution(s) Controversy, and Army Expansion: A Test of Two Explanations of Historical Influences on European State Making," *Comparative Political Studies* (forthcoming, 1999). For arguments about the application of these European military revolutions beyond Europe, in addition to Parker (*The Military Revolution*); and "In Defense of the Military Revolution," in *The Military Revolution Debate*, ed. Rogers), see the following: John F. Guilmartin Jr., "The Cutting Edge: An Analysis of the Spanish Invasion and Overthrow of the Inca Empire, 1532–1539," in *Transatlantic Encounters: Europeans and Andeans in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Kenneth J. Andrien and Relena Adorno (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Guilmartin, "The Military Revolution: Origins and First Tests Abroad," in *The Military Revolution Debate*, ed. Rogers; Stephen Morillo, "Guns and Government: A Comparative Study of Europe and Japan," *Journal of World History* 6 (1995): 75–106; Jeremy Black, "Technology, Military Innovation, and Warfare," First Annual Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy Lecture, Department of History, Temple University, Philadelphia, March 1996; Black, *War and the World, 1450–2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Thomas M. Barker, Jeremy Black, Weston F. Cook, and Geoffrey Parker, "Geoffrey Parker's Military Revolution: Three Reviews of the Second Edition," *Journal of Military History* 61 (1997): 347–54.

tary superiority idea seems intuitively obvious. How else is one to explain small numbers of Europeans defeating large numbers of non-Europeans? They must have been militarily superior to win, or else they would have been overwhelmed by their numerically superior opponents. The Europeans must have had better weapons or, as it was described (erroneously) in a recent *Newsweek* article, "168 Spaniards under Francisco Pizarro could, in 1532, massacre an army of 80,000 Incas . . . [because] the Europeans had steel swords, horses, ships, and writing, and they carried germs like smallpox."³

The above passage caricatures unintentionally the extreme version of the military superiority thesis (even though acknowledging certain nonmilitary advantages). Eighty thousand Incas were not massacred in 1532. It is inconceivable that 168 Spaniards could have massacred so many Incas at one time with the weaponry then at their disposal. They were able to massacre several thousand unarmed Incas while the rest of the Inca army watched. And therein lies an interesting analytical problem. There is no puzzle in how a few heavily armed people could surprise and kill a large number of unarmed people in a confined space. The real question is how they got away with it in the presence of a large and hostile armed force. The answer, it will be argued, has less to do with the coercive advantages of the sixteenth-century Spanish conquistador and more to do with Inca political vulnerabilities.

Nonetheless, Parker does not argue that 168 Spaniards massacred 80,000 Incas, and his actual argument must be outlined before we can proceed to the development of a counterargument. The following four statements summarize the portion of the Parker thesis that is most at stake in advancing a military superiority explanation of European ascendancy.

1. In the sixteenth century western Europeans revolutionized the way they conducted their warfare. On land, gunpowder-based weaponry and one of its consequences, the *trace italienne* artillery fortress, increasingly determined how battles and sieges were fought and who won them. Another consequence, large standing armies characterized by organizational and tactical discipline, also evolved in the Europeans' military favor. At sea, sailing ships with the increasing ability to fire on opponents at some distance were able to control strategic sea lanes.

³ Sharon Begley, "Location, Location . . . A Real-Estate View of History's Winners and Losers," *Newsweek*, 16 June 1997, 47.

2. Western Europeans used these military advantages against non-Europeans to compensate for their inferiority in relative population size and natural resources. They successfully resisted Ottoman expansion (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). European control was extended gradually over the Americas (sixteenth through eighteenth centuries), Siberia and most of Indonesia (seventeenth century), and much of India and parts of coastal Africa (eighteenth century). Although small groups of Europeans were able to bring about the abrupt collapse of two powerful empires in the first half of the sixteenth century, western Europeans had little impact in India until after the 1740s, thanks to rapid improvement in military methods.

3. Nineteenth-century improvements in weaponry (rapid-firing guns and armored steamships), facilitated by the industrial revolution, and the acquisition of Indian population resources enabled the Europeans to overcome the last effective resistance in east Asia. While China and Japan, unlike much of the rest of the non-European world, had been especially attentive and receptive to European military innovations when the Europeans had first arrived, the receptivity had been due to concurrent domestic instability and the premium placed on improving military capabilities. Once domestic stability was restored, the military innovations were marginalized, handicapping China's and Japan's ability to resist European incursions in the nineteenth century.

4. European dominance then was primarily a function of Western innovations in military technology and the failure of nonwesterners to adopt that technology quickly enough to offset the resulting military imbalance.

Obviously, Parker's military superiority argument is not without major caveats. He does not argue that western Europeans invented new weapons around 1500 and after, and then proceeded to sally forth and conquer the rest of the world. For that matter, Parker does not even argue that the Europeans were particularly interested in conquest and describes it as anachronistic to think otherwise.⁴ He recognizes that the Europeans had considerable trouble in their own Mediterranean backyard, with the Ottomans. In the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, one might call the European-Ottoman confrontation something of a draw. Parker is also well aware that the European expansion was a gradual affair, with the Europeans, by and large, restricted

⁴ Parker, *The Military Revolution*, p. 132. Nevertheless, the acknowledged lack of European interest in conquest seems problematic to an argument based on the rise of Europe via the demonstration of military superiority.

for several hundred years to small fortress-protected enclaves on the coasts of Afro-Eurasia. Stunningly quick victories in Mexico and Peru were not repeated elsewhere—even in the Americas, where European-induced diseases played so prominent a role in decimating the Amerindian population. European territorial control in Africa, India, and Indonesia took several hundred years to come about. East Asia proved to be the hardest nut to crack militarily, and that effort depended on an intervening industrial revolution.

Given these many and careful qualifications, one might well ask how such a nuanced argument could possibly be challenged. The answer is that the crux of the problem with the military superiority thesis is not concerned with either the West's possession of some forms of military superiority or the timing of Western expansion. Rather, it rests with the weight of military superiority in the explanatory balance. Most, if not all, analysts would certainly accept that other factors had significance as well. The main problem with the military superiority thesis is that its proponents argue that an edge in coercive technology and organization was the most important factor.⁵ That is a far more debatable proposition than whether the Europeans enjoyed some military advantages and sometimes exploited the advantage in conjunction with other factors.

There is a standard methodology in the social sciences for such questions about the relative weighting of multiple explanatory factors. Ideally, the analyst collects information on cases that vary in outcome and that also vary in terms of the mix of explanatory factors that are relatively present or absent in each case. Then it becomes a reasonably straightforward matter of determining relative weights for each explanatory factor through some form of statistical analysis—assuming, of course, a sufficient number of cases and an adequate ability to measure the factors that are thought to be important.

The problem in explaining the gradual expansion of western Eurasia's predominance is that there is little variance on the *y* variable (the outcome that is to be explained) and not much variance on the military superiority variable. European encounters with non-European groups did not always lead immediately to a European victory—but

⁵ Parker, for one, explicitly states: "For in large measure, the 'rise of the West' depended upon the exercise of force, upon the fact that the military balance between the Europeans and their adversaries overseas was steadily tilting in favor of the former; and it is the argument of this book that the key to the Westerners' success in creating the first truly global empires between 1500 and 1750 depended upon precisely these improvements in the ability to wage war which have been termed the 'military revolution'" (*The Military Revolution*, pp. 3-4).

eventually the outcome did tend overwhelmingly to favor the Europeans. The issue then is to determine the appropriate unit of analysis. Do we examine every battle and attempt to control for such factors as terrain, specific weapons involved, tactical errors, overconfidence, timidity, luck, and so forth? Or do we take specific areas or zones, such as, say, south Asia for a given number of years, and code the outcome at the end of that period?

The answers to these methodological questions are not self-evident. And, even if they were, we might still have reason to pause before undertaking a rigorous analysis. Assuming one could take care of the lack of variance in the outcome variable, there remains the question of how to code military superiority. Does any military superiority count? If the Europeans frequently had uncontested naval superiority, does that suffice to explain how they were able to defeat larger armies on land? If European steel swords beat non-European wooden clubs in combat, does that support a thesis that early modern European military revolutions were responsible for the rise of the West? Or do we need to find very specific links between the early modern military revolutions and the victories in the non-European theaters?

Finally, even if we could resolve the *x* and *y* variable coding problems, there remains the problem of theory. The military superiority argument is really a hypothesis that a certain factor deserves primacy in the explanatory equation. One thing the military superiority thesis does not do is specify exactly which rival explanatory factors may be significant but of lesser importance. Another way of describing this problem is that the military superiority thesis is not a comprehensive theory about the rise of regions to positions of political, economic, cultural, or military dominance over other regions. Rather, the thesis says that whatever else might be involved, it is military superiority that counts most—or, at least, counted most in the period between 1500 and 1800.

All these methodological considerations suggest that a definitive answer to how much weight one should give to military superiority must wait for better theory and more appropriate data than we currently possess. In the interim, however, it may be possible to explore further the substantive problem of the role of military superiority with the assistance of a purposive sample of cases falling between 1500 and 1800. If we examine more closely some of the most important cases (using a fairly loose definition of what constitutes a case), the questions to raise first are whether we find unambiguous evidence that European military superiority linked to early modern military revolutions was involved in the European victory and whether it is equally

clear that military superiority seems to have been the most important factor in each case.

One might propose to carry out this task as a completely open-ended search. Instead, a rival interpretation will be advanced here: that two additional factors, which interacted with each other and with military superiority, were at least as important as military superiority in the temporary rise of western Eurasia—or, more accurately, some peripheral parts of western Eurasia—over the rest of the world. In the absence of these two factors, military superiority alone would not have sufficed to bring about the regional primacy of western Europe. These two additional factors were the Europeans' ability to cultivate local allies and their ability to manipulate the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of indigenous political structures against their non-European opponents. Without local allies, especially in the 1500–1800 period, European military superiority would scarcely have been able to compensate for European numerical inferiority. Without the possibility of manipulating the vulnerability of opposing political organizations, the Europeans would more likely have faced something approximating the full mobilization of the resources available to their opponents. To their good fortune, the Europeans hardly ever had to deal with opponents functioning at full strength. Instead, they either capitalized on classical divide-and-rule tactics or avoided showdowns with patently stronger opponents. It is within this twin context of local allies and the strategic manipulation of weaknesses in political structure that Europeans were able to make most use of whatever variable military advantages they possessed. The avoidance of stronger opponents is the principal reason why the European ascendancy took so long to be manifested.

Local allies and weaknesses in political structure hardly exhaust the possible factors involved in the European ascendancy around the world. But they were as uniformly involved as was military “superiority”—in some respects, even more so. Still, rather than quibble about whether one factor was more crucial than another, perhaps the most reasonable approach is to suggest that it was the interaction among local allies, weaknesses in political structure, and military superiority that best explains European territorial expansion between 1500 and 1800, and later, in the “Columbian era” of world history. None of the three taken in isolation is capable of providing a satisfactory explanation. When they are viewed as an interactive trinity, however, a more powerful explanation emerges.

For instance, the strongest element in the military superiority thesis (for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) is the emphasis on

the development of naval superiority. Without this advantage, some west Europeans would not have been able to reach the Americas and southern/eastern Eurasia. Nor could they have survived once they had reached these regions, without maritime predominance. Yet maritime predominance was only necessary; it was not sufficient for European ascendancy. Predominance afloat facilitated survival before the nineteenth century. A lifeline to distant European resources was established just as European growth was reinforced by non-European resources.⁶ It is, no doubt, also fair to say that naval superiority facilitated the development of local allies. Some enclaves in Afro-Eurasia that formed links in European maritime networks were also defended by *trace italienne* fortifications.

European territorial conquest came early in the Americas, thanks primarily to less resistance (compared to Afro-Eurasia) in the form of geography, population density, primitive technology, indigenous disease susceptibilities, and the vulnerability of local empires to defection.⁷ Local allies and the clever manipulation of the opposition's vulnerabilities complete the picture. Military technological superiority was evident, but its significance should not be exaggerated.

European territorial conquest came much later to Africa and southern/eastern Eurasia. There, the potential for resistance was greater, although not identical in all parts of Afro-Eurasia. Some places were more difficult to penetrate, more densely populated, and less behind in technology. In Afro-Eurasia disease susceptibility was more of a problem for Europeans than the other way around. Military technological superiority in the form of organized firepower did become increasingly important in the eighteenth century, as did, though somewhat later, the nineteenth-century technological innovations emphasized by Headrick (gunboats, medicine, rapid-firing weapons, transportation and communication systems).⁸ But once again, local allies and the variable vulnerability of their opponents were also important—though not necessarily as independent processes. Various forms of military superiority made local allies more probable and, no doubt, contributed to the vulnerability of Afro-Eurasian land powers.⁹

⁶ William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 143.

⁷ Carlo M. Cipolla, *Guns, Sails, and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion, 1400–1700* (New York: Minerva Press, 1965).

⁸ Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁹ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

Even so, something quite important is still missing. A focus on European territorial expansion outside Europe cannot fully account for the European ascendancy, because territorial expansion per se does not explain the rise of the West. On the contrary, territorial expansion frequently was an undesirable and unplanned byproduct of European attempts to control east-west maritime trade routes.¹⁰ The attempt to control the Eurasian maritime trade routes, the subsequent elevation of the maritime routes over ones on land, and the consequent accelerated globalization of the Eurasian political economy are more important than one of the unintended consequences of the process in explaining European ascendancy. The ascendancy of western Eurasia from periphery to primacy did not hinge on the control of long-distance trade, but without that control, it is hard to imagine the development sequence we associate with European “modernization” and regional predominance.

To explore these ideas further, five cases are worth reviewing.¹¹ As cases, they are not equal in the types of structural focus they offer. Two (the Aztec and Inca cases) concentrate on events that occurred quite suddenly, while the other three (Portuguese, Dutch, and British expansion) highlight slower moving processes. The Portuguese case has a wide focus between west Africa and Malacca, while the other four are limited to more specific areas (what is now Mexico, Peru, Indonesia, and India). In all five cases, the information discussed is highly selective and, therefore, can at best only support the arguments at risk. Yet the five cases do tackle, and not coincidentally so, most of the main theaters of European expansion in Parker’s 1500–1800 period.¹² One element to watch for is the degree to which military superiority appears necessary, sufficient, or merely facilitative. Other elements that need assessment for purposes of relative significance are the role of local allies, the political vulnerabilities of the European opponents, and the strategic motivations underlying the expansion of European influence.

¹⁰ William R. Thompson and Gary Zuk, “World Power and the Strategic Trap of Territorial Commitments,” *International Studies Quarterly* 30 (1986): 249–67.

¹¹ The treatment of the cases will not advance new historical material. The idea is to pull together very briefly and selectively the available information that seems pertinent to an evaluation of military superiority, local allies, target vulnerability, and European strategies.

¹² In terms of the larger areas, Siberia and North America are ignored in this treatment. The Siberian case is less interesting, given the limited opposition encountered. The North American case is complicated but by no means an exception to the arguments that will emerge for other geographical contexts. See, for instance, Ian K. Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), who deemphasizes the role of European military superiority in North America.

Readers should keep in mind that these cases of expansion do not constitute the expansion of European influence as a regional whole. Rather, they are cases of iterative waves of expansion in which only some Europeans participated. Almost exclusively, they came from Europe's western maritime fringe. The selective identity of the agents of expansion also tells us something about the role of military superiority in the expansion process. Aside from the indisputable naval advantages of the people engaged in "European" expansion, the agents of expansion were not necessarily the principal sources and primary beneficiaries of European military innovation, at least in Europe. If they had been, they might also have been less inclined to forge new links to the Americas and eastern Afro-Eurasia.

THE PORTUGUESE CASE

This first case is admittedly different from the other four. It does not involve a specific confrontation or serial confrontations in one corner of the world between one set of Europeans and another set of non-Europeans. Rather, it focuses on Portuguese expansion throughout the world, with special emphasis on the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. It can be justifiably treated as a case because what the Portuguese did in that time period did not vary all that much—and that in itself is most informative. The limitations experienced by the Portuguese also were not all that different from the limitations experienced by their Dutch and British successors. Most significantly, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British aims were similar, even if their strategies were not always identical. Beginning with the Portuguese case therefore helps set the stage for subsequent efforts on the part of some Europeans to break out of western Eurasia. It also affords a good opportunity to introduce the Venetian model, which, as I will argue, served as a common foundation for European expansion in Afro-Eurasia (but not the Americas).

Another interesting dimension of the Portuguese expansion is that while it certainly capitalized on, and was in part responsible for, the improvements in European ships and navigation skills, it began before the full advent of the early modern military revolutions in gunpowder, *traces italiennes*, and infantry tactical training and discipline, or at least the ones with which Parker is most concerned. The 1415 attack on Morocco was a more traditional military invasion, conducted in part to allow aristocratic offspring to win their spurs in battle. Nevertheless, the initial outcome characterized Portuguese and other European

encroachments in Afro-Eurasia for the next 300 years or more. The Portuguese could capture cities, and sometimes could hold them, but they were not usually very successful in moving into the interiors of the areas in which they were interested. In short, they lacked the military capability to do so.

More generically, the Portuguese came to rely primarily on what might be called the Venetian model to create a string of fortified enclaves focusing on the area between the east African (Sofala), Persian (Ormuz), Indian (Goa), and Malay (Malacca) coasts.¹³ The leading historian of Venice, Frederic Lane, summarized what he perceived to be the essence of the Venetian model: "The Venetians sought sea power, not territorial possessions from which to draw tribute. Their wars were fought to effect political arrangements which would be disadvantageous to rival sea powers, which would make Venice's established trades more secure in Levantine waters, and which would gain them trading privileges permitting commercial expansion into new areas."¹⁴

By disadvantageous political arrangements, greater security, and trading privileges, Lane was suggesting politely that Venice, operating as a political-economic unit specializing in maritime commerce, sought to exclude all rivals whenever possible in order to minimize the uncertainties associated with commerce conducted far away from the home base. Maximizing the profits to be generated from long-distance trade was equally, if not more, important. Some application of coercive force usually was required to obtain trading privileges/monopolies from some foreign political authority. It could also more directly reduce the number of competitors operating in a specific market or area. Given the nature of the long-distance and maritime operations that were involved, naval power was indispensable in projecting coercive force.

Two other features of the Venetian model were a domestic variation on the monopoly principle and the development of a trading enclave network. The absence of foreign competitors greatly facili-

¹³ It is probably inaccurate or, at least, misleading to refer to this prototypical behavior as a Venetian model per se. Earlier versions can be found in the behavior of Dilmun traders, Minoans, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and, to some extent, Athenians—all of whom were influenced to various degrees by their chronological predecessors. There is also some resemblance to Baltic, Chola, and Srivajayan practices. But the Venetians perfected the model of a state run by trading interests for the benefit of expanding and protecting long-distance trade.

¹⁴ Frederic C. Lane, "Recent Studies in the Economic History of Venice," in *Studies in Venetian Social and Economic History*, ed. B. G. Kohl and K. C. Mueller (London: Variorum Reprints, 1987), p. 27.

tated ready access to desired commodities at predictable and attractive prices. The same principle was applied within the Venetian trading community as well by governmental encouragement of the formation of purchasing cartels, so that Venetian buyers would be less likely to compete with other Venetians. Governmental regulation was enhanced in the fourteenth century by the practice of official convoys. Certain high-profit goods purchased in the Middle East, particularly spices, could only reach Venice by traveling on leased galleys owned by the state. The galleys proceeded to Venice in escorted groups on scheduled dates. In this fashion, Venetian merchants received state protection in return for surrendering their autonomy to compete in the realm of transportation costs, routes, and timing. The power to deny access to transportation must also have proven useful in policing entrepreneurial behavior.

The trading enclave network was a combination of maritime linkages between the home port and the most important trade centers and selective militarization of some of the nodes in the trade network. Where local political authorities were fairly powerful, merchants had little choice but to accept whatever arrangements were offered. This usually amounted to operating out of an enclave designated for foreigners but subject to the laws, taxes, and whims of local rulers. The risks and uncertainties associated with these foreign endeavors, however, could be reduced if the commercial enclaves could be made autonomous, fortified, and/or made to double as naval bases.

Once some of the nodes in the trade network were dependable, commercial activities would function more predictably and more safely. A string of well-placed naval bases also served to protect trade against piracy and other types of competition. The same bases could be used to expand commercial opportunities into areas where resistance to trade was encountered. Invariably, some naval bases were particularly likely to become full-fledged colonial possessions with the gradual expansion of territorial control from an initial coastal fort into the surrounding countryside.

Hence, the Venetian model combined elements of long-distance trade specialization, sea power, coercive force, regulated competition among one's own nationals, and a trading enclave/base network with varying types of nodes depending on how much local resistance was encountered. Too much resistance meant that the network node would be moved somewhere less difficult. Little resistance but a strong local power meant that at best one had to accept being at the mercy of the local ruler's whims. The combination of little or moderate resistance and local weaknesses led to a higher probability of initial bases that evolved into colonies.

The Portuguese did not begin with this Venetian conceptualization in mind.¹⁵ Their fifteenth-century Moroccan campaigns initially resembled old-fashioned land conquests in the Iberian peninsula. The inability to penetrate beyond a few coastal cities led to a trial-and-error search for other strategies and, ultimately, the pioneering export of the Venetian model to the Indian Ocean. Muslim resistance to this intrusion ensured the need for coercion. But the development of a string of Portuguese bases around the Indian Ocean littoral and beyond depended as much on finding weak links to exploit as it did on the offensive firepower of Portuguese ships. Richards captures this aspect of European expansion particularly well when he notes that, in general, “along the coasts, whenever gaps in strong indigenous state power occurred, the European trading companies built autonomous city-states similar to Portuguese Goa.”¹⁶

Another way of looking at it, then, is that the Portuguese and their successors were reproducing small-scale versions of what they themselves constituted in western Eurasia (small enclaves oriented to long-distance trade and adjacent to large and more powerful land powers). The main objective was to better control the east-west maritime trade routes and the long-distance trade that used these routes. A strong interest in long-distance commerce was not unique to Europe, but it was only in coastal Europe (the Mediterranean, Baltic, and Atlantic fringes) that a few small states emerged with the advancement and protection of commerce as their principal reason for being, and survived long enough to have considerable long-term impact.

Ultimately, most of these European exceptions to the rule suffered the conventional fate of commercially oriented or maritime-oriented city-states throughout Eurasia—absorption by neighboring land empires. But in Europe the strategies of the small city-state with maritime or commercial orientations and the Venetian model were adopted by successively larger nation-states (first Portugal, then the Netherlands, and

¹⁵ Sources for the treatment of the Portuguese experience include Douglas L. Wheeler and Rene Pelissier, *Angola* (New York: Praeger, 1971); Bailey W. Diffie and George D. Winius, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415–1580* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Andrew C. Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier: A History of the Sixteenth-Century Ibero-African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea* (London: Frank Cass, 1980); Lyle N. McAlister, *Spain and Portugal in the New World, 1492–1700* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); M. N. Pearson, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Portuguese in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History* (London: Longman, 1993).

¹⁶ John F. Richards, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 239.

then England), all located on the seaward periphery of western Eurasia. These states, in turn, constituted the leading edge of the rise of western Eurasia as the predominant region in the world system.

Leading edge they may have been, but they still operated under conditions of severe limitations on military capability. They experienced little in the way of genuine, non-Western competition at sea because their ships were blue-water vessels (as opposed to galleys) that were strong enough to carry and employ increasingly large amounts of artillery. This naval superiority enabled its possessors to capture specific coastal cities ("wherever gaps in strong indigenous state power occurred") and to hold onto them as long as they could prevent simultaneous attacks from the sea and from the land. For a small state such as Portugal, this type of mobile maritime network strategy was critical, for Portugal lacked the manpower resources to do much more than hold on to a string of coastal bases. An attack on one node in the network could be met, if sometimes only barely, by moving resources from the rest of the network to the point under attack.

Yet the defense of the Sofala-Ormuz-Goa-Malacca core of this network was greatly facilitated by the fact that some of the strongest land powers in the area were usually relatively indifferent to Portuguese and later European coastal encroachments. Of course, this generalization applies less to the Ottomans and more to the Mughal empire and other large land powers in India. Indian rulers, as Pearson argues, were more likely to become concerned about trade only when it was interrupted or when tax revenues seemed to be eroding or clearly threatened.¹⁷ The identity of those who conducted trade, as long as they more or less behaved themselves, was not the most important issue to rulers who were more interested in expanding agrarian revenues and engaging in traditional land warfare. Many of these same rulers never went anywhere near the oceans that bounded some of their domains. Hence, the Portuguese (and other, later European) trading enclaves were attacked from time to time by local and European rivals, but they were not constantly besieged by the most powerful land forces in the general south Asian vicinity. If they had been, it seems likely that the Europeans would not have been able to hang on to their trading enclaves in India.

Outside the Sofala-Malacca core, the Portuguese employed different strategies. East of Malacca, they competed to some extent in the

¹⁷ M. N. Pearson, "Merchants and States," in *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350–1750*, ed. James D. Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

sixteenth century with the Spanish, based in the Philippines, but they were not in a position to compete with the Chinese or the Japanese who restricted and regulated trading contacts with the Portuguese. They are not considered to have had much impact on the Spice Islands or the Malay/Indonesian archipelago.

To the west of Ormuz, the Portuguese failed, despite repeated attempts, to capture Aden, which would have closed the Red Sea route to the Indian Ocean. They had access to several bases along the east African coast, which did not require as much military protection as in Eurasia, but made little headway into the interior of east Africa for some time. One index of the difficulties they faced was manifested in the 1541–43 intervention in defense of Christian rule in Ethiopia. The Portuguese defenders fared poorly against a Somali invading force accompanied by 1,000 Turkish musketeers. Only when most of the Turkish musketeers had left the area thinking their task completed were the Portuguese, in conjunction with an Ethiopian army, able to enjoy some success in the field.¹⁸

The Portuguese also had bases in west Africa and did attempt to move inland in the Congo/Angola region. After 100 years (1579–1675) of military campaigns relying heavily on African troops using traditional weapons, the Portuguese had penetrated about 150 miles east of Luanda. Another indicator of the limitations of Portuguese military superiority in west Africa is the fact that Portuguese troops were engaged in war in that region almost every year between 1579 and 1921.¹⁹

The Portuguese thus established an Afro-Eurasian pattern of European incursions that was maintained until at least the second half of the eighteenth century and, in some respects, even longer.²⁰ The Europeans usually possessed military superiority at sea, and could capture and hold on to small coastal enclaves in Africa and the area between southwest and southeast Asia, if necessary. However, their ability to do so depended on avoiding the wrath of large land powers and taking over small niches that already enjoyed some autonomy from adjacent empires. It also helped if the target was characterized by some type of internal disaffection. For example, when the Portuguese ran into resistance at Calicut, they were able to move down the coast to Cochin, whose ruler was seeking greater independence from Calicut. Malacca's sultan, another good example, had just executed his chief minister over a harem dispute. This seemingly trivial incident (although not so from

¹⁸ See Diffie and Winius, *Foundations*, pp. 354–57.

¹⁹ Wheeler and Pelissier, *Angola*, p. 40.

²⁰ The Portuguese were also involved in colonizing Brazil, but this effort was relatively slow to develop and did not encounter highly organized indigenous opposition.

the minister's perspective) exacerbated local Malay-Tamil tensions and alienated Chinese and Javanese merchants. In this context, the Portuguese attack, with a force that was about 40 percent Indian in composition, received some support from resident Chinese traders.²¹

In eastern Eurasia, the Portuguese had to be content with whatever was offered. For there, powerful rulers were less indifferent to the presence of foreign traders; the Chinese had defeated two Portuguese naval squadrons in the early 1520s.²² Survival on land was greatly facilitated by local allies and relative indifference to what groups performed external trading functions, as long as they did not pose a threat to internal stability.²³ What inland expansion was possible required not only local allies but also their soldiers, often as not employing traditional weaponry. The Portuguese clearly benefited from European technological changes in maritime capabilities and were leading innovators in this sphere. Without this type of superiority, the Portuguese could not have penetrated the Indian Ocean and beyond. Nor could they have survived once they had penetrated—something also facilitated by the construction of European-style fortresses. Otherwise, historians find nothing much remarkable about Portuguese military operations on land in terms of organization, tactics, or even weaponry.²⁴

THE AZTEC CASE

Hernando Cortés landed on the Mexican coast in 1519 with approximately 500 men, one-fourth of whom were stranded sailors.²⁵ The

²¹ John F. Cady, *Southeast Asia: Its Historical Development* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 175.

²² Macao was obtained in the mid-sixteenth century as a Portuguese base despite the naval defeats, as a matter of convenience for all concerned, and after Chinese-Portuguese cooperation in suppressing local piracy (Cady, *Southeast Asia*, pp. 187–88).

²³ The Spanish were evicted from trading in Japan due to Japanese fears that Spanish activity might encourage internal revolt tendencies (Cady, *Southeast Asia*, p. 241).

²⁴ See, for example, Pearson, *The Portuguese in India*, p. 57.

²⁵ The sources used for the Aztec case included Harvey C. Gardiner, *Naval Power in the Conquest of Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1956); R. C. Padden, *The Hummingbird and the Hawk: Conquest and Sovereignty in the Valley of Mexico, 1503–1541* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1967); John Elliott, "The Spanish Conquest and Settlement of America," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. 1: *Colonial Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Nathan Wachtel, "The Indian and the Spanish Conquest," in *Colonial Latin America*, ed. Bethell; Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial and Political Control* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Guilmartin, "The Military Revolution," in *The Military Revolution Debate*, ed. Rogers.

Spanish group fairly quickly proceeded to defeat the Tlaxcaltec tribe in two battles. However, this early Spanish victory may have benefited from the Tlaxcaltec incentives for finding new and strong allies in their own struggle with the Aztecs. Shortly thereafter, the Spaniards, accompanied by a large force of Tlaxcaltec allies, were invited to visit the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. Once inside the capital, the Spaniards were more impressed with the potential capability of the Aztecs than they had been previously, and that, presumably, was the main reason for the invitation in the first place. In any case, it did not stop the Spanish capture of Moteuczomah Xocoyotl within the first week of their arrival. This action at least bought them some time, for the Aztec ruler was prepared to cooperate in order to survive. He was also useful in suppressing initial dissent within the Aztec community against a cooperative policy. The timing of the visit worked in the Spanish favor as well. A respectable proportion of the population from which the Aztec army was recruited when needed, aside from the warrior elite, was committed to harvesting activities.

Eventually the Aztecs chose a new ruler and forced the Spanish to fight their way out of Tenochtitlán with considerable casualties. Once they had been evicted from the capital, Cortés shifted his strategy from a direct assault on the Aztec center to attacks on the surrounding region and a gradually tightening siege of the Aztec capital. Moteuczomah Xocoyotl died in the retreat from the Aztec capital. His successor died within three months of smallpox—something the Spanish had introduced to Mexico with their arrival. The rapid turnover in Aztec rulers created a significant political problem. The Aztec empire, for the most part, was a loosely knit structure over which the Aztecs presided. Their ability to rule depended less on bureaucratic monitoring than on the perception by the various groups within the empire that the Aztecs had more military power than anyone else and the inclination to employ it against dissidents. New Aztec rulers, therefore, were required to demonstrate their capability early on to keep the empire from unraveling. This expectation proved difficult to realize with three rulers in a very short period of time, and the third ruler (Cauhtemoc) in the quick succession made matters worse by eschewing any power displays at all. As a consequence, Cauhtemoc was perceived to be weak, a perception that invited rebellion. Imperial defections were likely in any event. Demonstrations of power could suffice only as long as the central Mexican system remained unipolar. The Spanish-Tlaxcaltec alliance constituted a second pole, and in a bipolar system something more than a demonstration of power would be required to hold the empire together.

That “something more” proved difficult to achieve in the circumstances. The Spanish strategy kept Tenochtitlán besieged and gradually cut off its supplies of food and water. Aztec numerical superiority declined as various subject groups defected to the other side. Attempts by supporters to come to the aid of the Aztec capital were defeated militarily as they arose, on a piecemeal basis. Eventually, starvation and disease reduced the power of the Aztecs to hold out any longer, leading directly to their final military defeat in 1521.

The Spanish did have better arms and armor. But any Eurasian invading force would have had better arms and armor than the Aztecs. European steel, for that matter, was derived primarily from Indian and Middle Eastern technological advances. The Spanish also had a few horses, firearms, and cannon. Yet the Aztecs seemed unusually quick in developing counter-tactics to deal with these advantages. The principal key to the Spanish-allied victory over the Aztecs was the development of a strategy that used the nature of the political organization of the Aztec empire to undermine its ability to compete and, ultimately, to function. As Hassig put it, “the Spanish conquest was not one of superior arms and wills but one that took advantage of existing cleavages within the system to split the empire, turn its members on the Aztecs, and rend it asunder.”²⁶

THE INCA CASE

In 1531 Francisco Pizarro invaded the Inca empire with fewer than 200 men and a small number of horses (27 initially, reinforced to 62).²⁷ The timing of the Europeans was propitious. The empire, which may have reached its maximum size only a generation before, was in the ending phase of a vicious civil war over succession rights, essentially pitting the north against the south. The Spanish exploited this situa-

²⁶ Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, p. 267. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for the point that any Eurasian invading force would have had better arms and armor than the Aztecs.

²⁷ Sources used for the Inca case were John Hemming, *The Conquest of the Incas* (London: Macmillan, 1970); Elliott, “The Spanish Conquest and Settlement of America,” in *Colonial Latin America*, ed. Bethell; Wachtel, “The Indian and the Spanish Conquest,” in *Colonial Latin America*, ed. Bethell; John V. Murra, “The Expansion of the Inka State: Armies, War and Rebellions,” in *Anthropological History of the Andean Polities*, ed. John V. Murra, Nathan Wachtel, and Jacques Revel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Ian Cameron, *Kingdom of the Sun God: A History of the Andes and Their People* (New York: Facts on File, 1990); Guilmartin, “The Cutting Edge,” in *Transatlantic Encounters*, ed. Andrien and Adorno; and Nigel Davies, *The Incas* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995).

tion by offering assistance to both sides at different times, as well as to various tribes that wished to remove themselves from imperial control. Some amount of devastation wrought by European-introduced smallpox had also preceded the arrival of the conquistadors.

After several months of meandering through Inca territory without being attacked by a large force, Pizarro's group was invited to a meeting with the Inca at a camp at Cajamarca. To their documented horror, the Spanish found the Inca ruler guarded by an army at least 80,000 strong. Spanish chroniclers of the encounter understandably emphasized their own initial fears and apprehension.²⁸ However, Pizarro quickly managed to trick the Inca ruler, accompanied by 7,000 unarmed soldiers, into visiting their own encampment, whereupon the Spanish proceeded to massacre the guards, with the assistance of a few cannon but principally with cavalry attacks and hand-to-hand combat between armed and unarmed soldiers caught within walled confines. The Inca ruler was captured, and he then ordered the considerable remainder of his army not to attack or to resist further.

Pizarro thus controlled the absolute Inca ruler in a highly authoritarian political system. But the massacre had also worked to his structural advantage in that Inca armies tended to be constructed around a small hard core of Inca troops. Conceivably, most of the massacred troops may have been Inca. The rest of the army in place is presumed to have been tribal levies, representing groups conquered by the Incas not long before, and perhaps having mixed feelings as to whether it was in their interest to respond to the crisis.²⁹ Another large Inca army was still engaged in civil-war operations some distance to the south. Subsequent battles involving relatively large and small numbers of Inca troops and equally variable numbers of Spanish appear to have been won largely by the advantages of surprise, better armor, and, most important, the steel swords and lances of the Spanish cavalry. The Amerindian opposition to Spain in the Peruvian/Chilean area eventually did

²⁸ See the testimony of several Spanish participants in Cameron, *Kingdom of the Sun God*, pp. 83–84. Guilmartin ("The Cutting Edge," in *Transatlantic Encounters*, ed. Andrien and Adorno; and "The Military Revolution," in *The Military Revolution Debate*, ed. Rogers) stresses the Spanish small-group tactical cohesion displayed in Mexico and Peru as an attribute learned in European wars, and therefore linkable to early modern European military revolutions. Still, there is a more compelling rival hypothesis. Since most of the conquistadors were not professional soldiers, sheer terror and desperation in the face of large numbers of opponents might explain group cohesion. The Spanish groups were much less cohesive when they were not faced with great odds.

²⁹ Unfortunately, no Inca sources are available to probe the actual attitudes of the Inca army at Cajamarca.

develop weapons and tactics to deal with cavalry, but not soon enough to expel the Spanish.

What stands out in both the Aztec and Inca cases is the very good luck and timing of the Spanish efforts, as well as the inability of the Spanish conquistadors to perceive accurately their own comparative weaknesses. Both the Aztec and Inca empires functioned best when they could intimidate their opponents.³⁰ With hindsight, it is easy to say that both Amerindian rulers erred tremendously in inviting the Spaniards to Tenochtitlán and Cajamarca. They should have engaged in hit-and-run tactics almost immediately, which probably would have worn down the invaders by attrition if nothing else. But it is also easy to see what their strategies were about, and that they had worked on previous occasions. The Spanish adventurers should have been more intimidated than they were when they were exposed to the respective strengths of the Aztecs and Incas. The inability of either group to intimidate sufficiently the Spanish invaders and their allies greatly facilitated the Spanish abilities to overthrow the two most powerful empires in the Americas.

In like fashion, the Spanish were successful in exploiting the structures of the imperial polities to their own advantage. In the Aztec case, Spanish successes in the field, siege tactics, and avoidance of combat with the Aztecs at full strength encouraged additional defections to add to their initial and considerably important alliance with the Tlaxcaltecs. In the Inca case, an intensive civil war preceded the arrival of the Spanish, which made it easier for the new arrivals to make allies and to avoid fighting the Inca army at full strength. In both cases, arms and armor no doubt facilitated the Spanish military victories. But the arms that mattered most were not based on gunpowder or fortifications. Steel swords and cavalry had long preceded the military technological revolutions in Europe of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Another nontechnological element, European-induced diseases, definitely contributed something to the Spanish victories as well—although probably not as much as the weaponry advantage. Ironically, the fact that the populations of the Aztec and Inca empires had some experience in centralized rule may also have helped the Spanish conquests. The Spanish had much more trouble dominating Amerindian groups that remained outside the two highly centralized (in some respects at least) empires.

³⁰ For instance, Richard E. W. Adams (*Prehistoric Mesoamerica*, rev. ed. [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991], p. 401) notes that Aztec rulers would even invite enemy rulers to observe their human sacrifice of enemy captives during ceremonies.

THE DUTCH INDONESIAN CASE

The Portuguese had attempted to supplant Malacca's fifteenth-century commercial dominance in maritime southeast Asia. They were able to seize Malacca in 1511, but they were never quite able to replicate the extent of commercial influence Malacca had attained before their arrival. Alternative entrepôts controlled by Aceh and Johor continued to offer respectable competition throughout the sixteenth century. The Dutch movement into this market was (or came to be) predicated on an early sixteenth-century plan that envisaged achieving a commercial hegemony of all trade in Asian waters. For the most part, territorial control was to be avoided as an unnecessary diversion of resources. A network of bases with, at most, control of a few key small islands should suffice as the infrastructure for the commercial empire.³¹

This Venetian network strategy was sabotaged early on and unwittingly by the decision to develop the central base of the network at Batavia (Jakarta) on the large island of Java and near a major source of spices. The Dutch required resources from the local population and some minimal level of security in which to create their spice monopoly. If the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had confined itself to the small islands originally contemplated, or if the Indonesian archipelago had more closely resembled the Philippines, things might have worked out differently.³² But the rise, fall, and violent competition of major indigenous land and sea powers in Java and elsewhere in the archipelago forced the Dutch to select allies among the competitors. They had little choice because even though they had access to superior arms and better trained military forces, they never had enough military force to overcome the numerical superiority of their opponents. They could not hope to defeat or defend themselves against a major Javanese military power without local allies. Part of the Dutch plan involved seizing a monopoly position in the transportation of Indonesian spices, and that objective required selective uses of force to suppress uncontrolled sources and punish interlopers. If the Dutch had abstained from intervening in local politics, they could not have achieved the monopoly

³¹ Sources for the Dutch Indonesian experience included Cady, *Southeast Asia*; D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1964); Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, vol. 2: *Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1300*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

³² The Spanish did not face centralized opposition in the Philippines and tended to leave their strongest opponents there, the Moros, alone as much as possible.

position peacefully and could not have expected to obtain the food, shipbuilding materials, and security from attack that they desired. For that matter, the Dutch required considerable military capability to hold off their European competitors.

The basic pattern that emerged entailed Dutch intervention in local succession struggles or rivalries. The Dutch would exchange their military capability for political subordination, trade concessions, and outright payments. But then the Dutch would be faced with the prospect of forever defending weak rulers. These same weak rulers sometimes lacked the capability to obtain their kingdoms on their own in a system that demanded repeated demonstrations of military might to stay in power. There were three implications. First, the VOC found itself constantly embroiled in military conflict and therefore needed to develop its own military capability at high expense for what was supposed to be a commercial endeavor. Second, at the same time, there were always limits to how far Dutch military forces could penetrate into the interior of Java. Opponents could retreat into the mountains and return when their own capability had been renewed. Third, intervention led to more interventions, and local rulers became increasingly tied to the Dutch for protection. By the mid-1700s Dutch decision-makers had recognized that they might just as well rule Indonesian territory directly as indirectly. In this manner, the initial idea of a commercial network (d)evolved into a more old-fashioned territorial empire after a century and a half of official resistance to the idea.

One of the fundamental ironies of the Dutch strategy was that the VOC virtually bankrupted itself in the eighteenth century pursuing the focus on monopolizing spices because of the military expenses associated with the way they did business. Moreover, by the time the Dutch had achieved something approaching a monopoly position in the Indonesian archipelago, the emphasis of European consumer demand had switched to textiles and tea, which were predominately being produced elsewhere. It took the Napoleonic wars and British troops to restore Dutch control in Java, and the restoration was accompanied by the assumption of full sovereignty of territories in the "Spice Islands" now devoted primarily to coffee and tea production.

THE BRITISH SOUTH ASIAN CASE

The initial European movement into south Asia in the 1490s immediately preceded the expansion of the Mughal empire from 1526 on. By and large, south Asian rulers were either indifferent or ambivalent

toward commercial transactions as long as goods continued to move in and out of the subcontinent and as long as they received some share of the profits. Partially as a consequence, long-distance trade in India was conducted primarily by non-Indians. The Portuguese arrival encountered the resistance of Muslim traders, which could sometimes be translated into conflict between the Portuguese and local Indian rulers. But if one ruler objected to the presence of the Portuguese, it was always possible to sail down the coast and find another ruler who was more obliging and possibly in a conflictual relationship with the first ruler. Portuguese naval power was used to make friends and to support fortified enclaves on Indian territory. The Portuguese might have aspired to greater territorial control, but they lacked the resources even to attempt such an undertaking. Nor could they do much to prevent the creation of Dutch, English, and French enclaves in the seventeenth century, all of which made their own arrangements with local rulers.

How this process functioned in the seventeenth century is well illustrated by what almost happened to the English East India Company.³³ Friction in Bengal with a provincial Mughal ruler in 1686 inspired the company decision-makers to attempt the seizure of Chittagong and Dacca with several companies of imported infantry. The English possessed local naval superiority but lacked any allies on land and were forced to retreat by a large Mughal army. Since the Mughal empire was also busy militarily elsewhere, it viewed the Bengal operation as a distraction. A long series of negotiations ensued, and while these were going on, the English tried a second attack with more troops accompanied by naval bombardments. The Mughal reaction was one of irritation, and in 1688 the emperor ordered the elimination of all English from India. There was little the English could do to prevent this as long as the issue remained a priority Mughal policy. But it did not remain one for long. The Mughals were still preoccupied with fighting their long-time rivals, the Marathas. By 1690 the English had talked their way back into the good graces of the Mughal empire. Their trading privileges were restored in exchange for the payment of

³³ The British involvement in India is covered in Alfred Lyall, *The Rise and Expansion of the British Dominion in India*, 5th ed. (London: J. Murray, 1910); James P. Lawford, *Britain's Army in India: From Its Origins to the Conquest of Bengal* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978); Penderel Moon, *The British Conquest and Dominion of India* (London: Duckworth, 1989); T. A. Heathcote, *The Military in British India: The Development of British Land Forces in South Asia, 1600–1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); and Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

a fine. For the next half-century the English East India Company avoided irritating the Mughal empire.

Circumstances changed in the eighteenth century in two important respects. After 1707 the Mughal empire had peaked and was in decline. The last vigorous emperor, Aurangzeb, died in that year and was followed by eight successors in nearly that many years. As the empire disintegrated, provincial governors became the rulers of nominally independent states, even though they maintained the fiction of Mughal overlordship. Disintegration invited successful outside attacks from the northwest by Persians and Afghans, and attacks from the inside by the Marathas and ambitious nobles seeking to expand their localized empires.

When war between the British and the French broke out in Europe in the 1740s, their commercial company agents in India at first attempted to coexist peacefully. In 1747, however, a French force attacked British holdings in Madras. The force included Indian peons armed with flintlock muskets (as opposed to clumsier firing matchlocks) and drilled in the European line-of-advance style. These innovations had been developed in Europe a half-century earlier but were only appearing in India at the end of the War of the Austrian Succession as a manifestation of European rivalries. The British responded in kind by bringing in more European troops and by training their own peons.

The nawab of Arcot felt that the French should surrender the captured Madras to its rightful owner, namely, himself. However, his army, consisting largely of traditional cavalry, was defeated easily by the combination of French infantry and artillery. This marked the first time that a European force had been able to dramatically defeat a larger Indian force. Whether accurate or not, the impression became widespread that the new European-style fighting could prove to be the decisive factor in intra-Indian combat.³⁴

After the conclusion of the Anglo-French conflict in 1748, the now enlarged, European company forces were essentially rented as mercenaries to local Indian rulers in return for fees and concessions. With the resumption of Anglo-French fighting in the Seven Years War, the European forces in India were expanded further. At Plassey in 1757 a 3,000-man British force defeated a 50,000-man Bengali army in another infantry-artillery versus cavalry situation. This time, however, the British victory had been facilitated by an arrangement with one of the

³⁴ Heathcote (*The Military in British India*, p. 26) implies that the effect may have been as much psychological as anything else.

Bengal nawab's lieutenants to defect with some three-fourths of the army in return for promoting the underling to be the new nawab.

Subsequently installed, the new nawab bestowed revenue-collection rights in the Calcutta area on his British allies, thereby giving them their first substantial territorial holding. In a series of events not unlike the earlier Dutch pattern in the Indonesian archipelago, the nawab came under Maratha and Mughal military attack. Additional British military protection was purchased at the cost of surrendering more tax-revenue collection rights, until the working arrangement fell apart. In 1763 a British force of nearly 8,000 men faced another 50,000-man Indian force combining the troops of the Marathas, the Mughals, and the recently deposed nawab of Bengal. The British victory at Buxar led to the Mughal surrender of tax-revenue collection rights in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa.

This basic process continued through the rest of the eighteenth century, the Napoleonic wars, and into the first half of the nineteenth century. The British, at first one of the strong independent powers within the south Asian region, would either intervene in succession struggles threatening their interest or else would ally with other Indian powers to suppress a mutual threat from another expanding Indian state. The outcome would be an enlarged British territorial domain. Continued conflict with the French and their allies also fueled the gradual expansion of the British and the escalation of their military capabilities, as the ultimate successor to the Mughal empire.

In both the Indonesian and south Asian cases, European strategies and capabilities roughly coevolved with changing Asian political circumstances. Naval power and fortified enclaves proved barely sufficient to maintain entry into Asian markets. They were insufficient to achieve the commercial wealth and degree of market control sought. Hall, writing about the VOC strategy, also captures an element of what happened in south Asia: "there was no conscious change of programme, no ambition on the part of the directors to transform their commercial empire into a territorial one. Yet such a transformation was inevitable . . . if they were to maintain and consolidate the position they had won for themselves in defeating their European rivals. The alternative was decline and in all probability extinction."³⁵

European rivalry certainly was an important element. No sooner would one European winner begin to lose steam when other European rivals would emerge to keep the competition going. The Portuguese bested the Castilians initially in the Old World, only to be absorbed

³⁵ Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, p. 301.

by the Spanish empire for some sixty years. The Dutch defeated the Portuguese, Spanish, and English competition, only to succumb to the gains made by their British ally. Yet the “inevitability” of the process depended greatly on what took place within the environment in which the European companies operated. It was not inevitable that no central Javanese land power would emerge triumphantly in complete (as opposed to partial) control of Java—although Dutch military superiority made an indigenous Javanese hegemony less likely. It was not inevitable that the Mughal empire would begin to disintegrate after 1707. British military superiority had little, if anything, to do with the demise of the Mughal empire. British military forces remained small in number, weak in capability, and largely employed in police, garrison, and warehouse guard capacities some forty years after the death of Aurangzeb. European rivalry altered that situation, and the subsequent changes in military capability then interacted with the decentralized character of opposition forces to lead eventually—but not inevitably—to the incremental British assumption of widespread territorial control in much of south Asia.

ASSESSMENT

Various sorts of military superiority were manifested in each of the five cases. In all five, naval superiority was essential for the Europeans to reach the other parts of the world and, once there, to hang on in the face of potentially overwhelming odds. Naval superiority was especially important in the Portuguese, Dutch Indonesian, and British south Asian cases; it was somewhat less critical in the Aztec and Inca cases. Much the same can be said about *trace italienne* fortresses. They were most important in holding on to some of the Afro-Eurasian beachheads until naval relief could arrive to fend off local attackers. The ability to deploy steel swords from horseback against Amerindian warriors on foot seems to have been critical, as far as military superiority goes, in the two American cases. On land, cannon, matchlocks or muskets, and highly disciplined infantry tactics may have been of some use, but they do not appear to have been either prevalent or critical until the late 1740s in India. They only became critical initially as a consequence of European infighting and the belated transferral of European tactics to Indian battlefields. The introduction of the novel tactics led to changes in the training, permanence, firepower, and expense of Indian infantry just as it had earlier in western Europe.

Certainly, some type of military superiority can be said to have

been necessary in all five cases. In none of the five, however, can it be said to have been either sufficient or most important to the abrupt or gradual ascendancy of the Europeans. Local allies were essential in all five cases. Without them, European military superiority could not have prevented defeat at the hands of large armies that had also been developed as tools of military expansion and conquest. Moreover, critical in every case was the ability of the Europeans to find and exploit vulnerabilities in their opponent's political organization. In the two Amerindian cases, the Spanish conquistadors took advantage of highly centralized but loosely organized empires that depended on displays of strength as much as on outright military victory to expand their territorial domains. The Spanish were not immune to the displays of strength. They were less impressed than perhaps they should have been, and they were able to manipulate that psychological edge to capture quickly the imperial heads. The Spanish victories in Mexico and Peru were not unlike judo throws in which a smaller player topples a much larger opponent through subterfuge and technique, as opposed to brute strength. Although they did not play out exactly the same way, Cortés's and Pizarro's strategies were similar and had similar effects in decapitating and disrupting their opponent's chain of command.³⁶

The Dutch VOC bankrupted itself attempting to corner the European spice market by controlling the sources of the spices. Naval power and local allies enabled the Dutch to defeat their local competitors and to prevent hegemonic aspirants on land in Java. Yet the Dutch lacked the military capability to pacify the Javanese interior. In the process, the Dutch became increasingly committed to propping up dependent but weak indigenous rulers and ended up with territorial responsibilities that had not initially been thought desirable or profitable.

The Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French survived in India through the mid-eighteenth century as long as they avoided irritating the Mughal empire. After the Mughal empire declined, the European actors became part of the postimperial melee over who was to control which pieces of territory. Not entirely intentionally, the British emerged from a position of acute weakness and one totally dependent on Mughal

³⁶ These Spanish successes in America were anything but inevitable. Something similar was attempted in southeast Asia toward the end of the sixteenth century and failed miserably (see Cady, *Southeast Asia*, p. 240). Forty Spanish adventurers, associated with an expedition sent from Manila, managed to capture and murder the king of Cambodia in 1596, only to be disowned by the head of their expedition who chose to exercise prudence by returning to the Philippines. Several years earlier (in 1583) a plan had been proposed to send an 8,000-man expedition to China to gain access for Catholic missionaries, among other things. Had the plan been executed, it would have made an excellent test of the military superiority thesis. Perhaps just as well for the life expectancies of the would-be expeditionaries, the plan was rejected by authorities in Madrid.

goodwill to become one of the stronger local powers. Eventually, they succeeded to the position of imperial center. The British Raj replaced the Mughal Raj after several decades of complicated succession struggles. Infantry tactics and artillery imported from Europe were crucial to this positional change, but they would not have mattered as much without Indian infantry and allies. In the absence of Anglo-French rivalry within the context of Mughal disintegration, it is debatable whether or when they would have been introduced in the first place.

European technological and military superiority became even greater after the late eighteenth-century industrial revolution. Yet it remains difficult to disentangle the offensive advantages of the Europeans versus the defensive vulnerabilities of the Chinese and the Japanese in the nineteenth century. Both the Qing and Tokugawa regimes had been in decline for some time when they were “opened up” by European and American coercion.³⁷ Table 1 provides some limited objective information on this dimension. One indicator of the organizational health or viability of regimes based on military conquest is continued territorial expansion. Territorial contraction indicates that the military conquest machine is losing its effectiveness and/or that the political economy based on continued expansion is deteriorating.³⁸

Table 1 suggests that the Inca and Aztec empires were not evidently in decline at the time of the Spanish arrival but that their imperial successes were not of very long duration. The Mughal and Ottoman empires peaked sometime in the seventeenth century, thereby facilitating the scramble for south Asian territorial control in the second half of the eighteenth century and various “Eastern Questions” in the nineteenth century involving the Ottoman “sick man of Europe.” In the

³⁷ There is a conventional tendency to view the European activities as incorporating parts of Asia into the world economy. This image is wholly inaccurate and overtly Eurocentric, for Asia had been a rather important part of the Eurasian world economy for millennia by the 1500–1900 c.e. period. The “incorporation” was more a matter of coercively arranging better terms and ease of entry into markets for non-Asian commercial agents. Other analysts have made this point in a variety of ways. See, for example, Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas D. Hall, *Rise and Demise: Comparing World Systems* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997); and Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

³⁸ An interesting illustration is offered by Keith Hopkins’s (*Conquerors and Slaves* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978]) analysis of the political economy problems encountered by the slowing down of Roman imperial expansion.

Table 1. The Timing of Imperial Expansion and Contraction
(Measured in Squared Megameters)

Year	Inca	Aztec	Mughal	Ottoman	Ming/Qing
1250	0.005				
1307				0.025	
1359				0.07	
1368					3.1
1382				0.3	
1400					3.9
1438	0.05				
1440		0.015			
1450					6.5
1451				0.69	
1463	0.2				
1468		0.08			
1471	0.45				
1481		0.10		1.22	
1493	1.9				
1502		0.17			
1513					3.9
1519			0.03		
1520		0.22			
1521				3.4	
1525			0.8		
1527	2.0				
1560			0.8		
1571				4.7	
1580			1.7		
1600			4.0		
1635					3.9
1645					4.9
1650					6.5
1660					7.2
1683				5.2	
1690			4.0		
1700					8.8
1710			2.5		
1725					10.6
1730				4.5	
1760					13.2
1770			0.2		13.7
1790					14.7
1817				4.25	
1840					14.2

Source: Rein Taagepera, "Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 475–504.

Chinese case, table 1 shows more or less continued territorial expansion from the seventeenth almost to the end of the eighteenth century, which correlates with Chinese feelings of decline first enunciated in the last quarter of that century. The indicator does not apply very well to the Japanese once they were repelled in Korea at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries, but Totman argues for a periodization of Tokugawa decline beginning around 1710 and supports this claim with data on increasing peasant unrest, another useful indicator of the decline phenomenon.³⁹

Going beyond the limitations of the data in table 1, there does not seem to be much disagreement about the decline, and the reasons for the decline, of the Chinese and Japanese regimes.⁴⁰ Both societies were in part victims of earlier imperial success in coercively imposing order and peace. The consequent doubling of the Japanese population (seventeenth century) and Chinese population (eighteenth century) outstripped the ability of the local political economies to meet the new demographic demands. In the Chinese case, population growth led to major internal migrations and group conflicts, exacerbated by an inflation in real tax rates (due in part to the silver outflow to pay for opium), an inability of peasants to pay their taxes, and an overextended and inefficient bureaucracy. Dealing with rebellions by Miao, Triads, White Lotus, Taipings, and Muslims—rebellions that often began in the areas in which in-migration pressures had been greatest—became the first priority of the Qing regime. The British and later the French demonstrated their mid-nineteenth-century military superiority against relatively small numbers of Chinese troops who were poorly led, underfed, reluctant to fight, and organized in an anachronistic and deteriorating Manchu banner system that had to be abandoned by mid-century. At the same time, the Chinese political leaders found it difficult to take the European threat fully seriously as long as the implications of internal revolt and turbulence seemed more threatening to the survival of the Qing dynasty.⁴¹

³⁹ Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁴⁰ Hans J. van de Ven (“War in the Making of Modern China,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30 [1996]: 737–56) and Peter C. Perdue (“Military Mobilization in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century China, Russia, and Mongolia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30 [1996]: 757–93) constitute exceptions to this generalization. Although their primary focus is elsewhere, they suggest that our views on nineteenth-century decline may be in for some substantial revision. That may ultimately prove to be the case, but the counter-argument for the first half of the nineteenth century remains to be made.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Jean Chesneau, Marianne Bastid, and Marie-Claire Bergere, *China from the Opium Wars to the 1911 Revolution*, trans. Anne Destenay (New York: Pantheon, 1976); Susan M. Jones and Philip A. Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion,”

In comparison, the internal and external pressures experienced by the Tokugawa regime were not as great as those felt by the Chinese. But the Tokugawa regime had been in decline for some time, its economy was no more able to cope with demographic pressures than its Qing counterpart, and, also like the Qings, the Japanese political elite underestimated the degree of external threat. When the black ships finally came to Japan, the Tokugawa regime did not survive the shock to the political system. Civil war that had been held off broke out, leading ultimately to the Meiji restoration. Yet the general point remains that while there is no denying Western military superiority in the nineteenth century, it was applied in rather limited ways against Asian regimes that were well into decline and less capable of effective resistance than they might have been a century before. Western forces did not have to be all that superior to defeat Asian opponents that were ripe for being vanquished by somebody as they struggled to cope with the conjunction of internal and external societal crises.

Obviously, one cannot claim that imperial decline, decay, and crises were solely responsible for the inability of the Chinese and Japanese governments to continue insulating their territories from the destabilizing intrusions of the world economy and various non-Asian agents. The claim is only that both pronounced decline of the Chinese and Japanese regimes and European military superiority were present in the nineteenth century, and that the two sets of internal and external phenomena interacted to ensure little effective Chinese and Japanese resistance to Western coercion. By this time (mid-nineteenth century) local allies were no longer as necessary as they once had been for European success.⁴² But then territorial conquest was not as much in evidence as a primary goal in east Asia as it had been in the Americas, or as it became in the Indonesian islands or south Asia, given the local circumstances of those theaters of operation.⁴³ Otherwise, the European encroachments and expansion efforts continued apace between the late fifteenth and the early twentieth centuries, largely as a consequence of

in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 10: *Late Ch'ing, 1800–1911*, pt. 1, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Frederic Wakeman Jr., "The Canton Trade and the Opium War," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 10: *Late Ch'ing, 1800–1911*, pt. 1, ed. Fairbank; and John K. Fairbank, "The Creation of the Treaty System," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 10: *Late Ch'ing, 1800–1911*, pt. 1.

⁴² Yet, given the asymmetries in casualties within the Western-organized coalitions, some might argue that the Cold War conflicts in Korea and Indochina restored the need for local allies if westerners expected to engage in military operations in eastern Eurasia.

⁴³ There were, of course, variations in the extent to which external actors were interested in Chinese territorial acquisitions. The Russians and the Japanese appear to have been more interested in territory than the British.

an interaction effect between varying external strengths and internal weaknesses. European coercive advantages played a role or, better put, roles throughout this process. But they were not sufficient, sufficiently important, or even the same types of superiority in different parts of the world to qualify as the key to the rise of European primacy.

The military superiority thesis thus exaggerates the role of European military superiority and its origins in a competitive, multipolar region's sequential military revolutions. It is appealing in part because it taps into an ancient process whereby lean, mean, and better armed warriors from the periphery successfully attack and defeat the center in combat.⁴⁴ The annals of world history are replete with images of peripheral barbarians attacking with the material assistance of iron swords, chariots, phalanxes, composite bows, and light cavalry. The European hordes after 1500 seem to fit in as another wave in a very old process. Two items are omitted from the analysis, however. First, the emphasis is placed almost entirely on the advantages of the external attacker when—and this applies to the older, pre-1500 cases as well—the external attacks were invariably preceded by internal disintegration, decline, or disorganization. Strong centers were subjected normally to frontier raids but not full-fledged attacks—unless, of course, the raiding exposed greater vulnerabilities than the raiders had expected.⁴⁵ Indeed, in some of the older cases, it is not clear from the archeological evidence whether the attackers “triumphed” only after the target had already disappeared as an organized entity.⁴⁶ In this respect, the sixteenth-century conquistadors were exceptional only in that they had

⁴⁴ This is essentially a variation on the fourteenth-century Ibn Khaldun model. Lean and mean warriors with cohesion descend from the mountains to capture the sedentary and complacent towns. But Ibn Khaldun stressed both the advantages of the attackers and the vulnerability of the attacked because the sedentary town rulers had once been warriors from the mountains and had become corrupted by the process of urban rule, thereby setting up a cyclical dynamic.

⁴⁵ The Mongol expansion seems to demonstrate an important variation on this principle. Thomas J. Barfield (*The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China, 221 B.C. to A.D. 1757* [Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989], p. 198) argues that the Mongols under Chinggis Khan never intended to conquer China. Rather, their conventional strategy of border raids for extortion purposes stimulated an escalating war with the Jurchen Chin dynasty, which had deviated from the typical east Asian strategy of limited resistance/appeasement. In the end, the Jurchen Chin destroyed themselves, and the Mongols found themselves in control of northern China for the first time. In such a case, an explanation that emphasized only Mongol military superiority would be overlooking the critical element of the Jurchen strategy and its consequences for the vulnerability of “Chinese” defenses.

⁴⁶ The Indo-European movements into India around the time of Harappan decline (early to mid-second millennium B.C.E.) are good examples of peripheral incursions/migrations that may well have taken place after the Harappan center had already disintegrated. The Dorian movement into southern Greece (late second millennium B.C.E.) is another.

to work harder to amplify the vulnerabilities that were already there than has often been the case in the past. Yet the point remains that an exaggeration of the external advantages manifestly distorts the role of equally important internal disadvantages.⁴⁷

The second omission is that an emphasis on military conquest masks the underlying political economy motivations and strategies. Just as it can be argued that many of the attacks of the peripheral warriors of yore were really contests over the control of trade routes, as opposed to simply the brutish demonstration of military prowess or an acquisitive lust for urban loot, the European (maritime) ascendancy was not predicated on violence alone, but was especially focused on the control of trade routes connecting eastern and western Eurasia. Lacking the military superiority to accomplish this feat in the manner of Alexander the Great—that is, on land—the most western of the Europeans sought control of the maritime routes and as much of the commercial flow on those routes as could be acquired. They were not inventing new forms of exchange as much as they were attempting to eliminate the fifteenth-century Venetian-Mamluk monopoly of east-west trade by circumventing the Red Sea–Egyptian route. This motivation, among others, led the Portuguese to move gradually down and around the African coastline into the Indian Ocean, and the Spanish to stumble into the New World land mass thinking it was a shortcut to Asia.

Spanish silver from American mines turned out (after the 1550s) to facilitate immensely European trade with the rest of Eurasia, either through the Acapulco-Philippines connection or via the more indirect sieve of Habsburg political-military ambitions in Europe. But the military conquest of South and Central America was not the leitmotif of European ascendancy. It was only one early, unintended consequence. The main action, after the 1490s, was always focused on establishing a competitive position in Eurasian maritime trade. Gradual military conquests in the Indonesian archipelago and south Asia were more, largely unintended consequences of engaging in coercive, long-distance commerce in an uncertain environment. In some respects, then, the European ascendancy occurred despite some forms of military superiority that tended to sidetrack strategies for commercial predominance. Put

⁴⁷ It is probably considered politically incorrect, somewhere, to stress the European advantage exclusively—even if that advantage is merely the superior capability to kill people. Even so, the point of this observation is not to imply Eurocentricity or political incorrectness on anybody's part, but simply to argue for a more balanced explanation of regional ascendancy. The success of militarily advantaged attackers is more comprehensible within the context of politically disadvantaged defenders, especially when the military advantages were rarely sufficient in the absence of considerable political vulnerabilities.

another way, some Europeans had just enough military superiority to stay around long enough to become bogged down in Afro-Eurasian territorial conquests in order to protect their coastal enclaves and commercial position, but not enough military superiority to avoid extensive territorial responsibilities altogether.

European ascendancy in the world system was not predicated exclusively on gradually assuming control of east-west maritime trade.⁴⁸ But the attempt to acquire that control was an important catalyst in fueling economic growth in Europe. Within the European region it contributed to the economic ascendancy of the maritime states over the larger, more traditional, agrarian states of Europe. It also greatly assisted the survival of those maritime states when adjacent land powers threatened to absorb them. The Portuguese were transitional in this evolutionary track and failed to prevent absorption by the more traditional and inherently agrarian-based Spanish empire. The Dutch and English fared better in their confrontations with the French, with the English managing to outlast even their twentieth-century German confrontations. Part of the same evolutionary track, however, was the gradual supplanting of the maritime leader by new, more capable, more innovative maritime powers with successively larger populations. The Portuguese gave way to the Dutch who, in turn, were replaced by the British. The British were forced to give way to the United States.

The ascendancy of the European region thus involves at least three different structural dynamics. One dynamic involves the rise and fall of leading sea powers that tended to center on European actors until the late nineteenth century. Another involves the interaction between sea powers and land powers within the European region. One of the ironies embedded within this story is that early modern European military revolutions enhanced the coercive capabilities of both land and maritime powers. It is conceivable that if the European land powers had been able to defeat the maritime powers conclusively in their iterative clashes early on, the ascendancy of Europe as the predominant region for a time might never have taken place. The third dynamic concerns the commercial and territorial encroachments of Europeans primarily against other Afro-Eurasians located outside the European region. Within each dynamic, there are tendencies toward the rise and relative decline of leaders and the supplanting of incumbent powers by former nonleaders. To explain why Europe became predominant,

⁴⁸ Other ingredients include population growth, urbanization, the development of food surplus, some level of insularity from attack, and sufficient economic innovation to accommodate these societal changes.

ultimately, we need to explain how these separate and overlapping dynamics worked and why some places become more innovative and capable than others for usually finite periods of time.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

To account for the evolution of differential regional success in the past half-millennium, it is not enough to say that one region became militarily superior to other regions and then proceeded to demonstrate that superiority over a period of 300–400 years. That did happen, though in a less than straightforward fashion. Yet military superiority as the explanatory key simply leaves unexplained too much of the variance in what else happened, and how it happened. The situation was too complex for historians to rely so heavily on a single-factor explanation that focuses on one of the advantages exploited overtly by the winners without also at least examining the context in which various forms of military superiority could be exploited successfully. Finally, battlefield success is one thing, but just how eventual battlefield success throughout Afro-Eurasia and the Americas fed into technological and economic growth in Europe is another complicated problem that tends to be assumed away or ignored. At the very least, it is debatable whether, to what extent, and in what fashion territorial conquests outside Europe led directly to economic and technological innovation within Europe. The argument here is not that non-European conquests had nothing to do with the European ascent, but that we have yet to work out the theoretical ramifications and empirical specifics of the various types of connections. Some aspects are obvious, others are much more subtle. This is an analytical problem much in need of further research in tracing the interconnections among the multiple and coevolving structural dynamics at work in an increasingly complex and interdependent world system.

⁴⁹ Attempts to model these dynamics can be found in George Modelski, *Long Cycles in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1987); Modelski, "Evolutionary Paradigm for Global Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 40 (1996): 321–42; Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower and Global Politics, 1494–1993* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Modelski and Thompson, *Leading Sectors and World Powers: The Coevolution of Global Economics and Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); William R. Thompson, *On Global War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); Thompson, *The Emergence of the Global Political Economy* (London: UCL Press, forthcoming); Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, *War and State Making: The Shaping of the Global Powers* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); and Rasler and Thompson, *The Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490–1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).