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Why International Primacy Matters

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Does international primacy matter? The answer seems so obvious that one first wonders why someone as intelligent, perceptive, and knowledgeable as Robert Jervis raises the question. On further thought, however, one sees that while the answer may be obvious for most people, the reasons why it is obvious may not be all that clear and may have been forgotten or lost in the other concerns of political scientists and economists studying international relations. By posing this question at this time of change in world affairs Jervis has constructively forced us to rethink why primacy is of central importance. This issue involves several subordinate questions. Primacy in What? First, what do we mean by primacy? Primacy in what? Politics is concerned with primacy in power. In international politics power is the ability of one actor, usually but not always a government, to influence the behavior of others, who may or may not be governments. International primacy means that a government is able to exercise more influence on the behavior of more actors with respect to more issues than any other government can. Or, as Lasswell and Kaplan put it in their classic formulation, the amount of power an actor possesses is a function of weight (degree of participation in decisionmaking), scope (the values that are influenced), and domain (the people who are

influenced). To ask whether primacy matters is to ask whether power matters. And the answer can only be: of course, it matters in most human relationships, even in families, and it obviously matters in national and international affairs. It does make a difference whether one party, politician, branch of government, interest group, public official, or national government has more or less power.

Samuel P. Huntington is Eaton Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard University, where he is Director of the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies. His most recent book is *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), for which he received the Grawmger Award.

1. Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 77. *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993) Q 1993 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 68 Why International Primacy Matters 169

than another. It mattered to a hundred million American voters whether George Bush or Bill Clinton or Ross Perot has primacy in shaping decisions affecting the United States. It matters to hundreds of millions of people throughout the world whether the United States, Japan, Germany, Europe, Russia, China, or some other entity has primacy in shaping decisions affecting the world. Political science is, indeed, the study of why, how, and with what consequences people get and exercise power in major collective entities. If power and primacy did not matter, political scientists would have to look for other work. Those who are skeptical concerning the value of primacy often approach the issue in terms of relative and absolute gains. The argument is that, given a choice, Actor A should prefer to achieve a gain of x even though Actor B is scoring a gain of $x+y$, rather than achieving a gain of $x-y$ while Actor B is scoring a gain of $x-2y$. The crucial issue, however, in the debate of absolute versus relative gains is: gain in what? Whether absolute or relative gains are to be preferred depends on the values at stake. If it is gains in health, Actor A probably will prefer a gain of x as against a gain of $x-y$, no matter what health gains Actor B may be achieving. With respect to wealth, in some circumstances actors may prefer absolute gains and in others relative gains. In Olympic competitions, probably most athletes would prefer to run the 1,000 meters in time t and win a gold medal than to run it in time $t-y$ if another athlete was making off with the gold by running it in time $t-2y$. With respect to power, however, absolute gains are meaningless. An actor gains or loses power compared to other people. Since it concerns the ability of people to influence each other, power is...

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Primacy in What?

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