During the waning years of the twentieth century, many people were heartened by a belief that the world was becoming more democratic, interdependent, and peaceful. Great-power war seemed unthinkable. As a procedure for settling serious disputes, trials of military strength looked as if they were going the way of dueling. According to the conventional wisdom of the day, politics among the great powers was “destined for a long period of normalcy” (Crumm and Rosenau 1994, p. 142).

Just over a decade into the new millennium, this forecast looked untenable. Sparring among national leaders in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing hinted that unsettling changes were afoot in world politics. During a March 2, 2014 interview on CBS’s Face the Nation, for example, US Secretary of State John Kerry complained that Russia was brazenly practicing power politics. Shortly thereafter, the Trump administration’s Nuclear Posture Review announced that great-power competition had returned to world affairs, and American policymakers groused that Russia and China were contesting the international normative order that the United States and its allies had built in the wake of World War II.

Established norms are particularly vulnerable when changing circumstances create new geostrategic conditions. “If you have a set of rules which conflict with reality,” former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw once observed, “then reality normally wins” (as cited in Cohen 2007, p. 129). The decline of American primacy in world politics coupled with increasing friction among the great powers signal that challenging new realities are emerging. What impact will this have on the international normative order? How resilient are the restrictive war-initiation norms of the post-World War II order?

War-Initiation Norms in a Changing Global System

The threat of brute force is an ominous presence on the world stage. Like Bia, the silent figure who personifies violence in the opening scene of Aeschylus’ Prometheus
The Durability of Restrictive Normative Orders

*Bound (1957)*, the threat of force doesn’t need to announce itself; everyone knows it’s there. Yet force’s ambit can be reduced. Foreign policymakers are less inclined to engage in the practices of power politics when war-initiation norms reject a freewheeling, realpolitik code of statecraft. Direct, full-scale armed conflict among states occurs less often within restrictive normative orders than it does within permissive orders.

As the twenty-first century began, the international normative order contained a set of restrictive war-initiation norms. But as the history of slavery and colonial conquest show, even norms that were once widely accepted are not immutable (Panke and Petersohn 2016). What are the chances that restrictive war-initiation norms will keep the sharp elbows of power politics in check throughout the remainder of twenty-first century? Under what circumstances might present-day ordering principles be superseded by more permissive norms?

The period after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington has been described as an interregnum between international orders. When al-Qaeda operatives crashed hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, they shattered widespread optimism about the prospects for peace in the twenty-first century. Danger now seemed everywhere.

Feeling vulnerable, an angry public demanded action. Token gestures and half-measures would not suffice. Calls for a complete reassessment of the laws of war reverberated across the nation as the United States undertook military operations against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Unconventional threats, various officials in the Bush administration insisted, required exceptional responses. Soon well-institutionalized norms against interrogatory torture and assassination began to crumble (Kutz 2014; McKeown 2009).

A few years later, when Donald Trump presided over American foreign policy, other supposedly rock-solid rules of the post-World War II normative order came under assault. Rejecting advice from his advisers, Trump ignored legal norms regarding the treatment of noncombatants and interceded on behalf of several Americans charged with war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq.1 “We train our boys to be killing machines, then prosecute them when they kill,” he complained in an October 12, 2019 Tweet. Censuring one warrior, he believed, eroded the mettle of others.

In Trump’s imagination, members of the combat arms were like Achilles on the plain of Troy—furious instruments of death and destruction cutting a swath through the ranks of the enemy. The president’s vision was not widely shared, however. Many senior military commanders, such as US Army General Martin Dempsey and US Marine General Charles Krulak, who had both served on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, chaffed at equating military personnel to rampaging machines. Discipline, individual accountability, and the laws of war, they countered, guided professional fighting forces.

Besides disregarding norms aimed at muzzling wanton violence, Trump also questioned America’s moral and legal obligations to uphold its commitments, whether to defend NATO allies under Article 5 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty or to support Kurdish partners in the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Holding
a brash, zero-sum attitude toward international affairs, Trump disparaged multilateralism, accentuated personal transactions, and elevated absolute gains above other considerations. In his mind, savvy leaders should not allow themselves to be encumbered by promises and precedents if they wanted to prevail in the competitive arena of world politics. Anything goes—brazen lies, crude threats, and empty assurances are all acceptable in order to “crush your opponent and come away with something better for yourself” (as cited in Daalder and Lindsay 2018, p. 8).

When the most powerful member of the state system—the very architect of the current rules-based world order—is led by someone who embraces a winner-take-all philosophy, it raises disquieting questions about the possible reemergence of a permissive normative order. As demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 5, the makeup of the international normative order varies over time. Neither restrictive nor permissive conceptions of statecraft have enjoyed consensual support without eventual challenge. The legal norms of one epoch have tended to give way to other norms decades later, sometimes rapidly but occasionally little by little (Panke and Petersohn 2011). Recall that whereas national leaders in the latter half of the twentieth century embraced a restrictive normative order, early nineteenth-century leaders generally perceived their interests as being served by a more permissive order. Does the Trump administration’s rethinking of how America should comport itself on the world stage portend a wider, more sweeping transformation in the international normative order? Is a swing toward permissiveness in the offing?

Throughout history, people have tried to foresee the future. In many ancient cultures, natural phenomena from earthquakes to the alignment of celestial bodies were interpreted as portents of momentous changes, and oracles claiming an ability to communicate with the supernatural realm offered advice on how to cope with these impending events. While no one can predict exactly what will happen in the future, it is possible to project how emerging trends might coalesce in different ways to produce plausible alternative futures that could call the current restrictive normative order into question.

Two nascent trends intrigue scholars who theorize about world order: (1) shifts in the array of the system’s basic units; and (2) changes in what these units can do to one another. The first pertains to growth in the prominence of nonstate actors that challenge the traditional state-centric vision of global security; the second concerns advancements in military technology that may revolutionize warfare. Each of these developments can be thought of in terms of a continuum or axis, with the four quadrants resulting from their intersection representing plausible alternative futures. The unit axis ranges from homogeneous actors, where sovereign, territorial states are the dominant players on the world stage, to heterogeneous actors, where a mixture of state and nonstate actors share more equitable billing. The capability axis ranges from small incremental changes in military technology to sweeping innovative changes. The unit axis ranges from homogeneous actors, where sovereign, territorial states are the dominant players on the world stage, to heterogeneous actors, where a mixture of state and nonstate actors share more equitable billing. The capability axis ranges from small incremental changes in military technology to sweeping innovative changes. As depicted in Fig. 9.1, different scenarios for the future of the current restrictive normative order exist in each quadrant. My purpose in proposing scenarios A, B, C, and D is not to predict the future. Instead, it is to underscore the fragility of
War-initiation norms in four alternative futures (While the restrictive war-initiation norms of the early twenty-first century may persist, there are several scenarios that would result in them being replaced by permissive norms. If terrorist groups come to be seen as acute threats, for example, national leaders might decouple how they act toward these militant nonstate actors from the way that they behave toward nation-states. Another possibility is that innovations in military technology leading to a new generation of first-strike weapons could result in a sweeping reformation of the normative order, as states gradually adopt security policies based on anticipatory self-defense and preventive war. Finally, a global future populated by a growing number of state and nonstate actors capable of launching incapacitating cyberattacks could lead restrictive war-initiation norms to decay)

the present order by sketching different ways for permissive war-initiation norms to gain strength despite evidence that this would likely contribute to an increase in the incidence of armed conflict.

**Norm Persistence**

Scenario A forecasts continuity. It assumes that nation-states remain the primary actors in world politics and their military capabilities change gradually. Barring a horrifying pandemic or a cataclysmic change in global climatological patterns that destabilizes international affairs, this scenario proposes that customary practices, diplomatic routines, and standard operating procedures will shape normative
expectations and interstate interactions in the years ahead. Inertia is a formidable ingredient in the policymaking process. What a state does tomorrow is often only marginally different from what it did today. Habit, rather than a methodical case-by-case analysis, heavily influences individual and organizational decisions (Becker 2004; Hodgson 1997; Pentland and Rueter 1994). Time-honored norms contribute to habitual behavior by sinking roots into a country’s political culture and institutions.

Although this scenario suggests that a restrictive normative order will persist, it does not imply that the future will unfold smoothly. As Chapter 6 reveals, elevated levels of strategic rivalry are associated with normative permissiveness. It is conceivable that competition among China, Russia, and the United States will intensify, leading these rivals to flirt with lax interpretations of prevailing norms. If an amoral, opportunistic philosophy of statecraft becomes entrenched in Beijing, Moscow, and Washington over the ensuing years, the stress on restrictive norms will be enormous. Notwithstanding this possibility, scenario A projects that the great powers are likely to remain wedded to some version of the current order despite toying with a more relaxed code of conduct. It submits that the appeal of permissive rules of the road will be episodic. Norms that most states support, and toward which few states are ambivalent, are extremely difficult to modify without a fundamental transformation in global circumstances (Byers 1999, p. 159).

A radical alteration in global conditions is not out of the question. Beyond the dangers posed by a global pandemic and climate change, major changes could occur in the international system’s basic units and in what they are capable of doing to one another. Either one could push the normative order in a permissive direction. The following three scenarios outline different ways in which this might happen.

### Norm Decoupling

Scenario B sketches one plausible way that the current restrictive normative order might veer toward greater permissiveness. It posits that while territorial states continue to hold a near-monopoly on the instruments of force, militant nonstate actors have become increasingly prominent, with some of them posing serious threats to state security. As their strength and belligerence grows, this scenario envisions a bifurcation of the international normative order, with a new body of permissive war-initiation norms emerging to give freer rein to states when they confront terrorist networks, crime syndicates, and other aggressive transnational organizations. The more that national leaders hold these actors in contempt, the greater the likelihood that they will not feel bound by restrictive norms when contemplating military actions against them.

Almost all international societies endorse an unwritten but widely understood distinction between the “civilized” behavior their members and the “uncivilized” behavior of outsiders (Gong 1984). This standard of inclusion/exclusion reinforces a state’s identity as part of a wider collectivity by describing what practices society members follow and affirming that this is the way they should behave (Hardin 1995,
Everyone belonging to a society of states recognizes certain common values that furnish a moral compass for navigating world affairs. Several neurological processes reinforce these values through the emotional tint that they give to within-society and outside-of-society interactions—relations among “us” versus relations between “us” and “them.” Biological research indicates that the amygdala and insula form us/them dichotomies rapidly from minimal physical and social cues. Oxytocin, a hormone produced in the hypothalamus and secreted by the pituitary gland, increases cooperation among in-group members but decreases it with those belonging to outgroups. Folks like “us” evoke feelings of trust and benevolence; people like “them” stir feelings of disgust and malevolence (Sapolsky 2017, pp. 115–117, 388–389; Harris and Fiske 2011).

More than any other outgroup “them” in world affairs, terrorist groups spur powerful negative emotions. A mixture of drama and dread, terrorism entails the deliberate use or threat of violence against noncombatants, calculated to instill fear, alarm, and ultimately a feeling of helplessness in an audience beyond the immediate victims. By presenting a threat that seems ubiquitous, unpredictable, and uncontrollable, terrorists arouse feelings of foreboding and vulnerability, even though their attacks are relatively rare events. Given the anxiety they create, it is not surprising that policymakers tend to overestimate the homogeneity of terrorist groups, exaggerate their cohesion, and conclude that decisive actions against them will yield popular support.

Emphasizing that terrorists and criminal syndicates flout codes of civilized conduct, the foreign policy commentariat often recommends shelving norms on the commencement and conduct of war when battling them. The Scottish philosopher and essayist David Hume (1948, p. 188) anticipated this advice, cautioning that if states faced enemies “who observed no rules even of war, the former must also suspend their observance of them.” By the early twentieth century, British manuals of military law followed suit, affirming “the rules of international law apply only to warfare between civilized nations” (as cited in Mazower 2012, p. 77). Uncivilized combatants, as an American specialist on irregular war complained, take advantage of those who follow legal rules (Colby 1927). The only way to defeat such enemies is to wage war without restraint.

The argument that no tactics should be barred when fighting those who reject the proprieties of war has a precursor in the double standard the Romans adopted when dealing with different kinds of adversaries. Unlike in the Hellenistic world, where the Romans faced what they defined as “civilized” states, elsewhere they encountered “barbarian” tribes who they fought on less principled terms. Between 155 and 130 BCE, for example, Roman leaders saw the inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula as treacherous foes (see Appian 2000). Any means was acceptable if it brought them to heel. Servius Sulpicius Galba, the praetor of Hispania Ulterior, promised to resettle the Lusitanians on more fertile land if they would disarm and agree to a peace treaty. After surrendering, they were slaughtered by his legionnaires. The exigencies of necessity, Galba asserted, required him to be as brutal and duplicitous as Rome’s barbarian enemies. His line of reasoning has reappeared periodically throughout military history. Most recently, it has been reaffirmed in the United States by followers...
of the Jacksonian tradition of defense policy: “Honorable enemies fight a clean fight and are entitled to be opposed in the same way; dishonorable enemies fight dirty wars and in that case rules don’t apply” (Mead 2001, p. 252).

The specter of indiscriminate attacks by terrorists with global reach has haunted the world since the dawn of the twenty-first century. Elusive adversaries who deliberately target civilians, strike symbolic sites in a horrific manner, and claim no fixed territory of their own are easily branded as a contemptible “them.” Given their status as an uncivilized outgroup, debates over how to defeat terrorists have a hard edge. Is it reckless to observe restrictive legal norms when an enemy ignores them? Does behaving lawfully hamper an effective military response, creating circumstances akin to fighting with one hand tied behind one’s back? According to this scenario, debates over these questions ultimately create pressure to decouple the norms that pertain to asymmetrical war with nonstate actors from the norms that apply to conventional war among nation-states, with the former acquiring a permissive character. The catch is that decoupling here can facilitate unraveling elsewhere. Once the rules for dealing with one type of conflict are no longer moored to the values and principles of normative restrictiveness, calls for greater latitude when confronting other kinds of security threats may also gain traction.

**Norm Reformation**

Scenario C sketches another path by which the current restrictive normative order might atrophy. The world remains state-centric, but innovations in military technology allow states at the cutting edge of this revolution to transform the battlefield, deploying new weapons and unveiling novel tactics. Whereas in the previous scenario a discrete set of permissive norms emerged to govern how states dealt with menacing nonstate actors, in this scenario the normative order shifts toward permissiveness to countenance preventive military action against another nation-state before its budding capabilities become fully formed.

Innovative changes in what states can do to one another have happened throughout history, with significant consequences for the norms of war. To illustrate the dismay that these changes can beget, consider the following example from rise of ancient Macedon. During the early summer of 341 BCE, Demosthenes, perhaps the greatest orator of antiquity, denounced King Philip II of Macedon in a passionate speech delivered before the Athenian Assembly on the Pnyx Hill. Philip was flouting the conventions of Greek warfare. Rather than facing his adversaries in pitched Hoplite battles, he enervated them through deception, intrigue, and new military technology. Nothing is as it once was, lamented Demosthenes, and nothing is changing more than the nature of warfare. Although Demosthenes exaggerated the extent to which classical Greek city-states observed customary rules of combat, he accurately gauged how Philip had revolutionized warfare and foresaw how this would transform the Greek city-state system.
Educated in Thebes shortly after Epaminondas’s stunning victory over the Spartans at Leuctra (371 BCE), Philip combined what he learned in Boeotia about military strategy with innovations he devised in battlefield tactics and operational art. In addition to introducing the long-pike phalanx to the Macedonian army and training his pikemen and light infantry to work in concert with the cavalry, he pioneered improvements in logistics and siegecraft, including the development of torsion catapults and large, mobile siege towers. According to military historians, Philip was a visionary who devised the means and the methods that underpinned Alexander’s subsequent military achievements (Billows 2018, pp. 104–137; Gabriel 2010, pp. 3, 254).

Demosthenes’s warnings highlight the deep-seated emotions evoked by changes that herald forthcoming vulnerabilities. When facing a novel security threat, anxiety and fear can push foreign policymakers toward a permissive interpretation of self-defense that justifies taking preventive measures to neutralize the dangers they envision. Unlike preemptive military action, which uses force to arrest an impending strike, preventive measures employ force to eliminate any possible future strike, even when there is no hard evidence that aggression is planned or the capability to launch such an attack is operational. Whereas the former is triggered by evidence of a credible, imminent threat, the latter stems from suspicion of an incipient, contingent threat.

The rationale for preventive military action emanates from the maxim that it is easier to remedy a worrisome development before it matures into a grave danger. As Cardinal Richlieu (1961, p. 80) made plain to King Louis XIII of France, nothing is more valuable in statecraft than foresight. “Just as a doctor who knows how to prevent illness is more esteemed than the one who works cures, so too … it is more important to anticipate the future than to dwell on the present, since with enemies of the state, as with diseases, it is better to advance to attack than to wait and drive them out after they have invaded.” Unvarnished realpolitikers endorse seizing the initiative to eradicate potentially dire threats. They acknowledge the difficulty of acquiring actionable intelligence on the intentions of adversaries, but aver that the absence of incontrovertible evidence of a future attack should not paralyze decision makers. The harm from an analysis that produced a false negative result would be devastating. The precautionary security policy advocated by former US Vice President Dick Cheney exemplifies this line of thought: Even if there is only a small chance of a catastrophic attack, act as if it is a certainty (Suskind 2006, p. 62).

Just as the revolutionary military technology and tactics of Philip of Macedon represented a dire security threat to the leading Greek city-states of the Classical era, today’s emerging military technologies—maneuverable hypersonic missiles, intelligent autonomous weapons systems, and quantum computing—pose a grave threat the leading nation-states of the post-Cold War era. Reaching speeds faster than Mach 5 while maneuvering to elude ballistic missile defenses, hypersonic missiles are unparalleled first-strike weapons. Beyond demolishing military targets and disabling communication and transportation infrastructure, they have the capacity to decapitate a country’s government. Leaving little time for a response, they would create immense pressure for a potential victim to take swift action during a crisis, using its military capabilities before they are destroyed (Smith 2019).
Intelligent autonomous weapons—aerial drones and terrestrial robots that would rely on artificial intelligence and the next generation of sensors to operate without human supervision—also may create “use-it-or-lose-it” incentives for potential victims. According to some defense analysts, swarms of these small, inexpensive machines could overwhelm the large, heavily manned military platforms that major powers currently field, thus spurring states to adopt a more permissive conception of self-defense.

Yet another daunting security challenge stems from quantum computing. Far more powerful than today’s supercomputers, a quantum computer could break the encryption systems protecting sensitive commercial, financial, and military information. Anyone with this technology would have the ability to penetrate a target country’s computer networks and corrupt its digital infrastructure. Worried that an adversary is about to consummate the work on such a devastating capability, national leaders might be tempted to interpret self-defense permissively, which would support attacking before the other side has completed the computer’s development.

A more immediate possibility than hypersonic missiles, lethal autonomous weapons, and quantum computing involves the embittered adversary of a particular country obtaining advanced technology that is already possessed by other states. Acquiring first-strike weapons, either through foreign procurement or domestic production, could create incentives for preventive action similar to those sparked by an adversary who was on the verge of developing an original, menacing, and ostensibly transformative military technology.

Reflecting on the proliferation of lethal, disruptive technologies, historian Ian Morris (2014, p. 340) has speculated that the next several decades could be more dangerous than any previous period in the annals of the modern state system. The automation of warfare, through the development of robotics and artificial intelligence, write two students of technological innovation, “constitutes the most significant shift in human combat since the invention of the gun” (Schmidt and Cohen 2013, p. 201). According to one study of the military implications of these technologies, threats around the world are “already exerting pressure” on the international legal order, “and this pressure will only grow over the coming years” (Wittes and Blum 2015, p. 172). A likely upshot is the rise of a permissive normative order that empowers the practices of realpolitik, which would not augur well for the global future.

Presumably, almost any state facing a chilling threat would define the range of acceptable responses in permissive terms, but how might an expansive standard of appropriateness diffuse throughout the state system? One possibility is through a process of behavioral contagion. When a major power promotes a reformed code of conduct—such as accepting permissive rather than restrictive war-initiation norms—it sets a precedent for others to follow. People tend to go along with precedents set by social influencers, especially when facing unfamiliar situations. Once some proportion of states emulate a new normative standard, a threshold may be crossed for additional states, their acceptance of the standard being contingent on how many other states are already complying. When these added states comply, yet another threshold will be crossed, and so on (Granovetter 1978). In this manner, a few prominent states may initially undertake preventive military actions for their own
security reasons, but over time their conduct could spread in a stepwise pattern, largely because their behavior generates a social proof, altering the normative frame of reference for everyone else by imbuing first-strike policies with an air of legitimacy. Under this scenario, the international normative order would move toward greater permissiveness by accepting anticipatory self-defense as a justification for resorting to war.

Norm Decay

Scenario $D$, which postulates major changes in both the system’s units and in what they can do to one another, outlines still another way the restrictive international normative order that we now inhabit might deteriorate. A prominent example of this type of system transformation occurred at the end of the Bronze Age, when mighty kingdoms from Anatolia to the Nile Delta faced a threat known as the “Sea Peoples.” A loose amalgam of maritime warriors, the Sea Peoples wielded a deadly combination of new weapons and tactics. Armed with javelins and long slashing swords, they excelled at close combat and relied on swarming attacks to overwhelm the outmoded chariot armies fielded by their opponents (Drews 1993, pp. 182, 192–193, 210). One after another, the Hittites, the Ugaritians, the Cypriots, and the Canaanites fell. Although the Pharaoh Ramses III finally repulsed the Sea Peoples in 1177 BCE, the complex system of diplomatic and commercial exchange that had flourished in the eastern Mediterranean collapsed.13

When formerly peripheral actors brandish fearsome new capabilities and muscle their way to the center of the world stage, the security repercussions ripple across the strategic landscape. Uncertainty mounts and apprehension spreads. Speaking at the US Military Academy at West Point on June 1, 2002, President George W. Bush placed these age-old fears in a twenty-first-century context. “New threats,” he warned, “require new thinking.” The gravest danger in the years ahead, Bush continued, “lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology.” If militant extremists acquired weapons of mass destruction, “even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations.”

According to this scenario, dramatic changes of the type described by President Bush foreshadow the emergence of a completely different pattern of world politics, one in which a restrictive normative order will increasingly be seen as problematic (see McFate 2019). Imagine how international norms might be affected if political extremists detonated a nuclear weapon in the central business district of a large metropolitan area. The blast, thermal, and ionizing radiation effects of even a single 10-kiloton bomb would be appalling: Everything within a one-half of a mile radius of the epicenter would be destroyed almost instantaneously; rubble, extensive fires, and broken utility lines would blanket the land over the next mile; electronic devices located up to three miles from ground zero would be severely damaged; and lethal amounts of radioactive fallout would be deposited for approximately nine miles downwind. Coping with the aftermath of the attack would place an unimaginable
strain on disaster relief efforts. Depending on the size and density of the city, fatalities might reach 100,000; casualties would climb even higher; and the long-term economic impact could total hundreds of billions of dollars. Further intensifying the crisis, residents in adjoining communities might panic, regional medical services could be overwhelmed, and thousands of square miles of soil would be contaminated (National Academy of Sciences 2009). Throughout the country, outraged citizens would clamor for revenge. Scorning anything that limited their response, national leaders under this scenario would insist that otherwise outlawed retaliatory actions would be justified by these circumstances.

Extremist nonstate actors can strike a debilitating blow against their opponents without nuclear weapons. The next generation of computer viruses and malicious software would cause havoc if they allowed hackers to manipulate election results or disable financial institutions, power grids, air traffic control systems, and the like. As traditionally envisioned, Westphalian nation-states were hard-shelled political units that could regulate what entered their material space. Today’s states are porous entities that have difficulty policing virtual space. The acme of military skill, wrote the ancient Chinese general Sun Tzu (1988, p. 67), belongs to “those who render others’ armies helpless without fighting.” Disrupting vital streams of data that are critical for a state’s early warning and military command and control systems is an effective, clandestine way to weaken powerful adversaries. By eroding the longstanding legal distinction between peace and war, inexpensive, incessant, and potentially incapacitating cyberattacks would provide fertile ground for the growth of permissive international norms.

System Transformation and International Norms

World politics is an intricate mix of patterned regularities and unique occurrences, methodical efforts and inadvertent mishaps. Cognitive psychologists find that human beings often are blindsided by international events due to a tendency to imagine that the future can be foreseen simply by extrapolating from the immediate past. Yet the ways of the world are far more complicated: Some trends are linear, others change direction; some trends intersect, others diverge over time; and some trends amplify one another’s effects, while others cancel them out.

Everyone holds mental images of world politics that simplify reality by downplaying this complexity. Most people ignore processes that build slowly, misjudge cumulative probabilities, underestimate how incremental changes can give rise to an abrupt transformation once a critical threshold is passed, and overlook cascading effects and feedback loops. Focusing their attention on recent experience and assuming stationarity, they engage in persistence forecasting.

During the final decades of the twentieth century, movement toward ever more restrictive war-initiation norms characterized the international normative order. True to the predictions of cognitive psychology, innumerable commentators on world
affairs assumed that this trend would continue. In their minds, change was unidirectional and irreversible. Little thought was given to the possibility that normative restrictiveness might be a transient phenomenon.

Pronounced changes in the elemental conditions of world politics are precursors to shifts in the substance and configuration of international norms. In the words of a former counselor on international law at the US Department of State, “much as commercial law reflects the market, or the legislation of government reflects events in politics,” international legal norms reflect the strategic environment (Bobbitt 2002, p. 355). Additions to the cast on the world stage and advances in what they are capable of doing create new strategic realities with the potential to unravel the current normative order. The scenarios sketched in this chapter are not the only plausible alternative futures for world politics. They merely suggest what could transpire, and how the existing order might become more permissive, which would expand the zone of acceptable behavior to include practices that for decades have been considered beyond the pale. Although we cannot know what the future holds, thinking through different scenarios sensitizes us to the consequences of the choices we make here and now. Almost every action we take today involves some expectation about the future. If our expectations were different, our actions would be different.

Looking beyond our time and place is difficult. Many efforts to foretell what is in store for humanity are more noteworthy for their absurdity than their accuracy. Still, some features of the near future can be imagined if a structured analytic effort is made to consider what developments loom on the horizon and how they might interact. Significant changes in the array of international actors and their capacity to project power could cause restrictive war-initiation norms to fray as skittish policymakers respond impulsively to nascent threats. For those who believe that restrictive war-initiation norms are impotent, power politics offers a bold and brawny alternative. In fact, calls for a return to realpolitik have already begun (see Gewen 2020). A restrictive normative order may be an irenic factor in world politics, but power politics is seductive during periods of unnerving change. When new geostrategic realities emerge and apprehension mounts, few policymakers worry about how the Gordian knot of national insecurity is untied.

Notes

1. Preliminary research suggests that popular attitudes toward the traditional rules of war may be changing, too. Conventional just war theory views rank-and-file soldiers fighting for an unjust cause as morally equal to those fighting for a just cause, as long as they obey the rules of *jus in bello*. A recent survey by Sagan and Valentino (2019) indicates that many Americans have come to judge soldiers who participate in unjust wars as less ethical than those waging just wars, even when no significant differences exist in their conduct on the battlefield. Furthermore, much of the American public today seems willing to waive *jus in bello* rules governing noncombatant immunity for soldiers fighting for a just cause.

2. Many people allege that Trump possesses a “what’s-in-it-for-me” attitude, charging that personal profit, not national interest, often drives his behavior.
For example, in a November 2019 speech delivered to Morgan Stanley clients in Miami, former National Security Adviser John Bolton asserted that some of Trump’s foreign policy moves were motivated by his desire to reap financial benefits (Ruhle and Lee 2019). Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (n.d.), a prominent watchdog organization, has tallied over 2500 conflicts of interest during Trump’s first one thousand days in office.

3. Sometimes Trump has pressured foreign leaders for personal political reasons. According to testimonies given between November 13 and 21, 2019 to the House Intelligence Committee by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent, former Ambassadors William Taylor and Marie Yovanovitch, former Senior Director for Russian and European Affairs on the National Security Council Fiona Hill, and US Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland, Trump withheld vital congressionally authorized military aid to Ukraine in an attempt to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to publicly announce an investigation into former Vice President Joe Biden, who Trump saw as a formidable opponent in the 2020 US presidential election. Their claims were dismissed by acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, who had declared in a news briefing on October 18, 2019: “We do that all the time with foreign policy … Get over it.” During an interview in San Antonio on November 18, 2019, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson countered Mulvaney’s assertion by insisting to broadcast journalist Judy Woodruff that “asking for personal favors and using United States assets as collateral is wrong.” The US Government Accountability Office concurred, issuing a legal decision on January 16, 2020 that the Office of Management and Budget violated the law when it withheld security assistance to Ukraine.

4. During an August 9, 2019 interview on CNN’s Anderson Cooper 360°, former U.S. Foreign Service Officer Charles Park sharply criticized the “unapologetic cruelty” of the Trump administration. Similarly, in an August 26, 2019 op-ed published by the New York Times, former Foreign Service Officer Bethany Milton complained about the administration’s “small-minded chauvinism.” While it is beyond the scope of this book to provide a comprehensive evaluation Donald Trump’s foreign policy performance, it is worth mentioning that his repeated use of insults, bullying, and fabrications has led some people to warn that he is undermining America’s international stature (Nye 2020, p. 173). According to a public opinion survey spanning 37 countries, a median of 22% of respondents expressed confidence that Trump could be counted on to do the right thing in international affairs, compared to 64% during the final years of Barack Obama’s presidency (Wike et al. 2017, p. 3). Even America’s closest allies have little faith in his foreign policy acumen. Gérard Araud, a former French ambassador to the United States, described Trump as “a big mouth who reads basically nothing.” Similarly, Kim Darroch, a former British ambassador to the United States, called Trump “inept” and “uniquely dysfunctional.” Trump was also ridiculed by world leaders during a speech that he delivered at the UN General Assembly on September 25, 2018 and during a conversation among Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, French President Emmanuel Macron,
Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and Britain’s Princess Anne at a reception held in Buckingham Palace on December 3, 2019 in honor of NATO’s 70th anniversary. Irish columnist Fintan O’Toole (2020) captured attitude in many countries toward the United States when he wrote that America under Trump has become a country that foreigners pity.

5. Even if the system’s leading actors and their relative military capabilities remain fixed, an economic depression and a surge in xenophobia triggered by the coronavirus pandemic could disrupt global governance, breed protectionist attitudes, and foster the rise of a permissive normative order. Still more disquieting, a significant alteration in the global climate could cause ecological degradation and worldwide disruptions in food and freshwater supplies, prompting national leaders to embrace permissive norms that justify taking extraordinary, and heretofore illicit, measures to corral scarce natural resources and stave off refugees fleeing environmental calamities ranging from desertification to rising sea levels.

6. On occasion, the category of “barbarian” has been used to depict a spirited, morally superior nation. Johann Gottfried von Herder, for example, portrayed the Teutonic barbarians as a robust, energetic people who infused vitality into an exhausted, declining Rome. For a discussion of this atypical usage, see Cannadine (2013, pp. 227–233).

7. Lee (2011, pp. 8, 160–165) points out that war is an act of communication with its own internally consistent grammar, in which actions carry meanings that are understood by people from the same cultures but remain incomprehensible to outsiders. Drawing on the history of Anglo-American wars with Native Americans, he notes that one of the complications inherent in combat between people from different cultures is making one’s grammar intelligible to those who do not share the same logic of war. Actions accepted as normal by one side may be deemed atrocious by the other, resulting in an escalation of violence.

8. Greene (2013, pp. 25–26, 54–55) suggests that moral thinking evolved as a device to attenuate selfishness and promote cooperation within groups; that is, to put “us” ahead of “me.” However, it did not lessen the difficulty of bringing different groups together, allowing “us” to live side-by-side with “them.”

9. The standard that Romans applied to fighting barbarians was similar to the one they employed when taking military action against bandits and pirates. Seen as criminals unworthy of respect, bandits and pirates were subject to harsher measures than those used against combatants waging war on behalf of civilized states. The Romans often called barbarian tribes “outlaws” in order to legitimize the brutal methods used against them (Goldsworthy 2016, p. 237; see also Fuhrmann 2012).

10. Predicting another state’s behavior is difficult: The aims of leaders can be hard to discern; information on an adversary’s long-range goals are often obscured by its attempts to shroud policy planning in secrecy; evidence on the options being considered for attaining those goals may be misinterpreted due to a carefully crafted deception campaign; and signals of impending moves might be distorted by background noise.
11. John Bolton, one of Donald Trump’s national security advisers, epitomized this concern in an essay published in the *Wall Street Journal* on February 28, 2018, which justified a preventive military strike by the United States against North Korea on the grounds of anticipatory self-defense.

12. A note of caution is warranted. The embrace of a given norm by some states does not guarantee that it will spread throughout the international system. For a discussion of the factors that impede norm diffusion, see Garcia (2009).

13. Little is known today about the Sea Peoples. Inscriptions in the Egyptian temple at Medinet Habu declare that they included the Danuna, Peleset, Shekelesh, Tjekker, and Weshesh tribes. As bellicose and formidable as they must have been, it is unlikely that the Sea Peoples were solely responsible for the collapse of the eastern Mediterranean civilizations of the Bronze Age. Instead, the archaeological evidence points to a combination of factors that severely weakened the once-thriving kingdoms of the region. Earthquakes, drought, famine, internal rebellion, and external invasion occurred in rapid succession. As one scholar of the period concludes: “There probably was not a single driving force … but rather a number of different stressors” that shattered this ancient state system, with each factor amplifying the impact of the others (Cline 2014, p. 170).

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