

Reading and Viewing Guide

Game Theory #5: The World Game

Why states rise and fall - Jiang Xueqin alongside eight competing explanations

Jiang Xueqin's 57-minute lecture offers one memorable answer to a very large question: marginal groups develop energy, openness, and cohesion; success changes their incentives; elites begin competing against one another; and a more adaptive outsider eventually replaces the divided centre.

This guide explains that argument clearly and fairly, then places it beside other major explanations developed by historians, economists, political scientists, and anthropologists. Some agree that solidarity and elite rivalry are central. Others emphasize institutions, taxation, administrative capacity, warfare, finance, geography, disease, ecology, local knowledge, or bargaining between states. The purpose is not to put Jiang on trial. It is to let each viewpoint answer the same question in its own terms.

Main video: [Jiang Xueqin, Game Theory #5: The World Game](#)

How to use this package: Read the video chapter first even if you have watched the lecture. Then move through the viewpoints as independent explanations, not as footnotes to Jiang. After Viewpoint 8, use the brief synthesis to compare the theories through historical cases and one integrated model.

Reading route

1. Begin with Jiang's complete cycle. His main contribution is to treat power as a problem of coordination rather than a simple inventory of wealth, population, weapons, or land.
2. Read Ibn Khaldun next. His fourteenth-century account of *asabiyyah* is the intellectual ancestor of the lecture and gives solidarity, taxation, dynasty, and luxury a more precise historical setting.
3. Move to Peter Turchin. Structural-demographic theory translates parts of the cycle into population pressure, falling living standards, elite overproduction, fiscal distress, and political instability.
4. Read the institutional viewpoint. Acemoglu, Robinson, North, Wallis, Weingast, Fukuyama, Besley, and Persson explain durable power through rules, access, state capacity, accountability, and the control of violence.
5. Add Olson and Scott. Olson asks why rulers ever provide public goods; Scott shows how the administrative tools that make a state powerful can also make it blind to local knowledge.
6. Add Tilly, Fearon, and Kennedy. They explain state-building and decline through war, taxation, credit, bargaining failures, productive capacity, alliances, and imperial overstretch.
7. Add Diamond and Tainter. Their material and ecological accounts explain why different societies begin with unequal possibilities and why complexity can become too expensive to maintain.
8. Finish with Anderson, Putnam, and Ostrom. They show how a common identity is produced, why some kinds of cohesion become exclusionary, and how cooperation can survive without a heroic leader. The short synthesis that follows shows how the lenses can work together without turning any one of them into a universal law.

Guiding question: When a state rises or falls, which matters most - solidarity, institutions, material resources, external competition, environmental conditions, or the way these forces reinforce one another?

The debate in one page

Jiang's answer begins with people at the margin. Because they face pressure and possess little, they must cooperate, learn, and improvise. A shared story lets them act as one. Victory then creates offices, wealth, hierarchy, and inherited privilege. More elites compete for a limited number of prestigious roles, public institutions become weapons in private factional struggles, and outsiders are invited into the system as soldiers, allies, traders, or specialists. The outsiders learn the centre's methods and eventually replace it. The other writers in this guide do not simply say that this is right or wrong. They change the causal centre of the story. Ibn Khaldun focuses on the solidarity of ruling dynasties; Turchin on demographic and elite pressures; institutional thinkers on rules and capacity; Olson on the incentives of rulers; Scott on administrative blindness; Tilly on war and extraction; Fearon on bargaining failure; Kennedy on the economic base of power; Diamond and Tainter on geography, disease, ecology, and complexity; Anderson, Putnam, and Ostrom on identity and durable cooperation. Together they turn one elegant cycle into a field of competing mechanisms.

The main lenses at a glance

Lens	Main claim	Best at explaining
Jiang	Marginal groups rise through energy, openness, and cohesion; success produces factional decay	Why resources do not automatically become usable power
Ibn Khaldun	Strong <i>asabiyyah</i> builds dynasties; distance, luxury, extraction, and generational change weaken them	Repeated replacement of ruling groups
Turchin	Popular hardship, too many elite aspirants, fiscal distress, and geopolitical pressure reinforce instability	Recurring periods of internal political breakdown
Institutions	Capacity, broad access, rule of law, and accountability determine whether power can be built and corrected	Why some states adapt after becoming wealthy
Olson and Scott	Rulers provide order when it serves their long-term interest, but centralized control can erase local knowledge	The double edge of state-building
Tilly and Fearon	War builds extraction and administration; conflict also follows information and commitment failures	State formation, alliances, and strategic conflict
Kennedy	Power rests on production, finance, technology, logistics, and sustainable commitments	Relative decline and imperial overstretch
Diamond and Tainter	Geography and disease shape starting conditions; complexity can face diminishing returns	Material inequality, shocks, and systemic collapse
Anderson, Putnam, and Ostrom	Identity is constructed; bridging trust and legitimate rules sustain cooperation	How strangers become a public without one saviour

What exactly can “fall”?

A **state** is a territorial organization that claims governing authority. An **empire** rules hierarchically over several territories or peoples. A **dynasty** is a ruling family or succession line. A **civilization** is a cultural continuum that can survive many regimes and borders. These are not interchangeable. Rome lost its western imperial government while Roman law, Christianity, cities, languages, and an eastern Roman state continued. A dynasty may disappear while the administrative state is reconstructed. A great power may lose relative influence while its citizens become wealthier.

“Fall” can therefore mean regime replacement, territorial contraction, defeat in war, fiscal insolvency, loss of administrative complexity, population collapse, or a decline in relative power. [Guy Middleton's *Understanding Collapse*](#) emphasizes that the label can conceal transformation, migration, continuity, and unequal experiences within the same society. Before accepting any theory, ask what unit and outcome it is trying to explain.

Main source: Jiang Xueqin's World Game

Type / time: YouTube classroom lecture / 57 minutes / published January 20, 2026

Central claim: Material advantages matter less than they appear because political power depends on motivation, learning, solidarity, and the incentives operating inside a coalition.

Direct links: [Video](#) | [Official transcript article](#) | [Timestamped transcript](#)

Part I: why the margin can defeat the centre (00:00-18:00)

Jiang begins with Qin's victory in China's Warring States period. If an observer had compared population, resources, agriculture, geography, and technology, he argues, Qin would not have looked like the inevitable unifier. He extends the pattern to Macedon, Rome, the Mexica, Akkad, Persia, and other groups that rose from a poorer or less prestigious edge and defeated richer centres. The puzzle is not how many resources a society owns, but whether it can mobilize them toward a common purpose.

His answer comes from Ibn Khaldun's idea of *asabiyyah*, usually translated as group feeling or social solidarity. Jiang separates it into three qualities. **Energy** means motivation, effort, and the willingness to build rather than live from inherited rents. **Openness** means humility, learning, experimentation, and adaptation after failure. **Cohesion** means trust, loyalty, sacrifice, and the ability to act as a team.

Marginal groups develop these qualities because pressure forces them to learn from stronger neighbours and rely on one another.

Wealth can reverse the incentives. Elites can extract rather than produce, ordinary people focus on immediate survival, and inequality creates groups with different stakes in the political order. A society may therefore possess armies, money, and a large population while losing the ability to use those assets collectively. This is the lecture's most important distinction: **resources are potential power; coordination turns them into actual power.**

Part II: success changes the game (18:00-34:00)

An early rising group resembles a start-up. It asks people to sacrifice for an uncertain future, so it needs a shared story. Jiang treats poets, prophets, priests, and heroic leaders as political technologies: they teach strangers to imagine the same community and give them a reason to cooperate. Competition among neighbouring states also rewards learning. Rival courts recruit talent, copy successful methods, and remain alert to failure.

Victory makes authority permanent. Leadership becomes office; office becomes bureaucracy; bureaucracy becomes inherited privilege. Elite families and ambitious aspirants multiply faster than the highest positions. Those excluded from the centre form factions, seek opportunities abroad, or try to capture the institutions that distribute status. The public game and the private game then separate. An official may speak about the good of the state while being rewarded for protecting a family, court faction, party, military network, or economic coalition.

Factions conceal information, punish disloyalty, and sometimes recruit outsiders. Border peoples, mercenaries, traders, allies, and client rulers enter the centre's networks, learn its technology and rivalries, and become players in its internal struggles. Once public coordination breaks down, the invited outsider can become the successor. In Jiang's cycle, decline begins when winning the internal factional game pays better than maintaining the common system.

Part III: the classroom game and the future (34:00-end)

Jiang illustrates the argument with a classroom simulation. Teams named after countries receive unequal starting resources. The United States begins with almost everything and usually wins, while Pakistan begins with very little and often finishes second by bargaining, working for others, improvising, deceiving, or stealing. A second classroom story has the worst-performing team reflect and improve while the first-day winner becomes complacent. Jiang uses both stories to argue that scarcity can produce resourcefulness and success can weaken learning.

He then moves from a historical cycle to bold forecasts. He expects declining futures for the United States and China, sees greater potential in North Korea than in China, and identifies Germany, Japan, and Israel as possible future imperial powers. He distinguishes being rich from setting the rules of the system and interprets alliances, finance, energy, and trade through that distinction. The lecture ends with an argument about imagination: a poor and scattered population will not become cohesive until leaders, stories, or institutions teach it to see itself as one. He applies that claim controversially to development organizations and leadership in Africa.

Jiang's cycle at a glance

Stage	What changes	The new incentive
Marginal beginning	Scarcity and external pressure make survival uncertain	Cooperate, learn, improvise
Common project	A leader or story gives separate people a shared purpose	Sacrifice for a possible future

Stage	What changes	The new incentive
Expansion	Competition rewards talent, copying, and adaptation	Contribute to a winning coalition
Consolidation	Offices, taxes, armies, and status become permanent	Protect position and inheritance
Elite congestion	More aspirants compete for fewer prestigious roles	Form factions and block rivals
Hidden game	Public institutions become tools of private coalitions	Win inside the court even at public cost
Outsider succession	Allies and frontier groups learn the centre's system	Replace a coalition that can no longer coordinate

Four ideas to carry into the rest of the guide

1. A state is not one player. It is a coalition whose members may value different outcomes and possess different information.
2. Material resources and mobilized power are different. Taxation, legitimacy, administration, logistics, and trust connect one to the other.
3. Success changes feedback. Protected winners may stop learning, while offices and rewards can be captured by private networks.
4. Collective identity is causal. People accept costs for distant strangers only when stories and institutions make those strangers part of a common “we.”

The remaining chapters begin from the same historical problem but supply different engines. Some make Jiang's cycle more measurable. Others show routes to rise and decline that do not require a loss of energy or cohesion at all.

Viewpoint 1: Ibn Khaldun and dynastic solidarity

Key work: *The Muqaddimah* (fourteenth century)

Core claim: Ruling groups gain power through *asabiyyah* - the capacity to act collectively - but dynastic rule changes the social and economic conditions that produced that solidarity.

Direct links: [Overview of Ibn Khaldun and imperial cycles](#) | [Peter Turchin on Ibn Khaldun's model](#)

How the mechanism works

Ibn Khaldun wrote in a world of tribes, cities, dynasties, taxation, trade, scholarship, and repeated regime change in North Africa and the wider Islamic world. *Asabiyyah* is sometimes translated as group feeling, solidarity, or collective capacity. Kinship can generate it, but alliance, hardship, shared interest, and religion can enlarge it beyond blood relations. A group with strong solidarity can coordinate force, accept sacrifice, and follow leadership. A religious mission can join previously separate groups to a wider project.

After conquest, the ruling group settles into urban life, monopolizes authority, collects taxes, and distances itself from the rough solidarity that brought it to power. Later generations inherit rank without having built the coalition. The ruler may weaken independent clan leaders, rely on professional soldiers or mercenaries, and surround the court with specialists. These choices can strengthen the dynasty in the short term while making it more expensive and less able to reproduce its original loyalty.

Ibn Khaldun also gives economics a larger place than a simple story of luxury and softness. Excessive extraction can discourage production and shrink the tax base. A government may respond to falling revenue by taxing more heavily, producing a damaging loop. Court expenditure rises just as the social foundation of rule narrows. Decline is therefore fiscal and organizational as well as cultural.

What this viewpoint explains especially well

It explains the repeated replacement of ruling houses by groups with stronger internal solidarity, particularly where government depends on a relatively narrow military coalition. It also explains why an empire can appear administratively impressive while its ruling core becomes dependent on agents whose loyalty must be purchased. The theory is strongest when its unit is a dynasty or ruling coalition, not an entire civilization with one personality.

Where it differs from Jiang

Jiang generalizes the cycle across civilizations and modern states. Ibn Khaldun's original setting is narrower and more concrete: who supports the dynasty, how the ruler treats producers, how revenue is collected, and how the ruling group changes over generations. His account does not require every citizen to lose energy. The decisive change may occur inside a small coalition that controls taxation and force.

Modern connection

In a modern democracy, *asabiyyah* can be translated into **legitimate collective capacity**: enough common trust that people pay taxes, accept election losses, share risks, and defend institutions that also protect opponents. This is harder than clan solidarity because the political community includes people of different religions, classes, regions, and identities. The modern challenge is not maximum unity. It is a civic solidarity strong enough to support common action without treating disagreement as betrayal.

Viewpoint 2: Peter Turchin and structural-demographic cycles

Key works: *Historical Dynamics*, *Secular Cycles*, *Ages of Discord*, and *End Times*

Core claim: Political instability grows when popular living standards deteriorate, elite aspirants multiply, state finances weaken, and external pressures intensify at the same time.

Direct links: [*Historical Dynamics: Why States Rise and Fall*](#) | [*Secular Cycles* excerpt](#) | [Metaethnic frontier theory](#) | [2010 instability forecast in *Nature*](#)

From solidarity to measurable pressures

Turchin's field of cliodynamics tries to model and compare historical change rather than rely only on narrative examples. His “metaethnic frontier” theory develops the Ibn Khaldun side of the story. Long competition across a boundary separating large religious or cultural identities can intensify internal solidarity and generate expansionist states. Unlike an impressionistic cycle, the theory tries to identify frontiers, model the mechanism, and compare predicted patterns with historical state formation.

Structural-demographic theory addresses internal breakdown. Population and elite numbers can grow faster than available land, income, offices, and prestige. Labour becomes abundant relative to demand, real wages may fall, and ordinary households become more vulnerable. At the same time, education, wealth, and elite family growth produce more people who expect influence than the system can absorb. Competition within the elite becomes more intense because the prize is not merely money; it is access to law, office, media, patronage, and protection.

Fiscal pressure completes the loop. A state facing higher costs and lower legitimacy struggles to raise revenue. Disappointed elite aspirants have the skills, networks, and resources to mobilize popular anger. External rivalry or military defeat can turn a difficult situation into a crisis. Instability rises not because everyone becomes decadent, but because the social structure produces too many actors with strong reasons and sufficient capacity to challenge the existing order.

The pressure sequence

Pressure	What changes	Political effect
Popular immiseration	Wages, security, health, or opportunity deteriorate	Grievance grows and state legitimacy weakens
Elite overproduction	Aspirants multiply faster than prestigious positions	Factions and counter-elites become more aggressive
Fiscal distress	Revenue cannot meet obligations and expectations	Public goods erode while extraction becomes more contentious
Geopolitical pressure	War, rivalry, or dependency raises costs	Internal weaknesses become harder to contain

Evidence and limits

Turchin's advance is not that his answer is automatically correct; it is that the variables can be debated, measured, and compared. A [study of late Qing China](#) found that population expansion, restricted examination opportunities, and fiscal stress preceded higher internal conflict. Yet a [direct test using U.S. data from 1948 to 2020](#) did not support several expected links among labour oversupply, relative wages, elite income, and recent instability. Modern finance, labour markets, globalization, welfare states, and mass education do not behave exactly like agrarian systems.

Where it differs from Jiang

Turchin replaces a moral change after success with a distributional mechanism. Elites can remain hardworking and patriotic while destabilizing the order because too many of them are competing for too few protected roles. Ordinary people can retain national identity while rejecting institutions that no longer offer security or mobility. The focus moves from whether a society “has energy” to whether opportunity, elite competition, fiscal capacity, and external pressure are becoming mutually destructive.

Modern connection

Watch blocked mobility as closely as poverty. A society becomes vulnerable when credentials and expectations grow faster than meaningful paths to influence, when rival elites abandon shared rules, and when public finances weaken just as demands increase. This is not a clock predicting inevitable collapse. It is an early-warning framework for pressures that may still be relieved through reform, growth, redistribution, wider access, or institutional renewal.

Viewpoint 3: Institutions, access, and state capacity

Key works: Acemoglu and Robinson's *Why Nations Fail*; North, Wallis, and Weingast's *Violence and Social Orders*; Fukuyama's *Political Order and Political Decay*; Besley and Persson's work on state capacity

Core claim: Durable power depends on institutions that can implement decisions, control violence, create predictable rules, admit new organizations and talent, and correct rulers when they misuse authority.

Direct links: [Harvard overview of *Why Nations Fail*](#) | [2024 Nobel summary on institutions and prosperity](#) | [North, Wallis, and Weingast on limited and open access](#) | [World Bank, “What Is State Capacity?”](#)

Inclusive and extractive institutions

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson distinguish broadly between inclusive and extractive institutions. Inclusive political institutions distribute authority widely enough to constrain rulers, while inclusive economic institutions let broad groups invest, innovate, form organizations, and retain a meaningful share of the return. Extractive institutions concentrate power and opportunity in a narrow coalition. They can produce growth for a time, especially when rulers direct resources toward a known technology, but they discourage the creative disruption that threatens incumbent privilege.

The important disagreement with a fixed rise-and-fall cycle is that prosperity need not destroy openness. Courts, opposition parties, professional administration, transparent budgets, public education, open entry, and peaceful leadership turnover can make correction routine. Success may generate rents and complacency, but it can also finance the institutions that expose error and widen participation. The outcome depends on how power is organized.

Controlling violence through elite bargains

North, Wallis, and Weingast begin from a different problem: how do societies control organized violence? In a **limited-access order**, powerful groups receive rents and privileges in exchange for not fighting. Restricted banks, professions, land rights, companies, or offices are not merely corruption; they can be part of an elite bargain that makes peace preferable to conflict. The bargain is stable while each powerful group believes it receives more through cooperation than violence.

An **open-access order** makes the right to form political and economic organizations more impersonal. Parties, firms, unions, associations, and movements can enter without needing a personal grant from the ruler. Competition becomes less dependent on the identities of particular elites. This framework explains both the usefulness and danger of factional rents: they may stabilize a violent order, then become barriers to wider entry and adaptation.

Capacity, law, and accountability

Francis Fukuyama separates three dimensions that are often merged into “good government”: a capable state, rule of law that binds rulers, and political accountability. A state can be strong but arbitrary, democratic but administratively weak, or lawful but unable to provide security and public goods. Besley and Persson make capacity concrete as long-term investment in fiscal and legal systems. Governments must identify people and property, collect revenue, enforce contracts, maintain records, move supplies, recruit skill, and borrow credibly.

Dimension	What it contributes	Failure mode
State capacity	Revenue, administration, infrastructure, security, implementation	Plans exist on paper but cannot be carried out
Rule of law	Predictability and limits that apply beyond the ruler's convenience	Power becomes arbitrary and investment becomes risky
Accountability	Information, contestation, and peaceful correction	Leaders can privatize reward and hide public failure
Open access	New people and organizations can enter politics and the economy	Incumbents close opportunity and talent turns against the order

What this viewpoint explains especially well

Institutional theory explains why highly cohesive groups sometimes fail to build durable states and why wealthy societies sometimes recover. Motivation becomes power only when it is translated into records, revenue, logistics, law, skill, and succession. Conversely, an established state can renew itself by opening access, constraining extraction, professionalizing administration, and replacing failed leaders without destroying the political order.

Modern connection

The practical diagnostic has two halves. **Capacity**: can the government implement collective decisions competently and fairly? **Constraint**: can citizens and institutions detect, limit, and replace those who

misuse that capacity? Capacity without constraint becomes predation. Constraint without capacity becomes paralysis. Cohesion can support both, but it cannot substitute for either.

Viewpoint 4: Olson and Scott - why state power helps and harms

Key works: Mancur Olson's "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development" and *The Rise and Decline of Nations*; James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State*

Core claim: Stable rulers may provide order because productive subjects increase long-term revenue, yet the simplifications required for central control can destroy local knowledge and create brittle systems.

Direct links: [Olson, "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development"](#) | [James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*](#)

Olson's stationary bandit

Olson begins with a stark model. Under anarchy, many "roving bandits" steal whatever they can and have little reason to leave producers with the means to invest. A bandit who monopolizes a territory becomes stationary. Because the ruler expects to collect taxes in the future, total destruction is no longer rational. Peace, roads, predictable extraction, and other public goods can increase production and therefore the ruler's revenue. State formation does not require a social contract or shared national spirit; it can emerge from a coercive actor's enlarged time horizon.

The stationary ruler still takes more than citizens would freely choose. The point is comparative: monopolized extraction can be less destructive than uncontrolled predation. A broad democratic majority may have a more encompassing interest because it bears more of the social costs of bad policy and receives more of the general benefits of prosperity. Secure rights and predictable succession can extend the time horizon of both rulers and citizens.

Olson's later work also explains sclerosis inside successful societies. Small, organized groups receive concentrated benefits from favourable rules while costs are spread thinly across the public. Because each citizen has little incentive to fight every privilege, distributional coalitions accumulate. They make the economy less flexible not because the entire culture loses energy, but because narrow groups are better organized than the people who pay the diffuse cost.

Scott's problem of legibility

Scott asks how states see. To tax land, conscript soldiers, enforce law, or deliver services, a government simplifies a complex social world. It standardizes names, measures, maps, property categories, addresses, languages, crops, and occupations. These tools make large-scale administration possible. Qin's household registration, cadastral surveys, censuses, and uniform measures are examples of the general process by which a centre makes people and resources legible.

The danger appears when the simplified map is treated as the whole territory. Local practices contain practical knowledge - *metis* - that may not fit a central category. High-modernist projects combine administrative simplification, confidence in a universal plan, authoritarian power, and a civil society too weak to resist. Scientific forestry can maximize one measurable output while degrading the ecosystem

that sustained the forest. Planned villages can improve administrative neatness while disrupting farming, kinship, and local exchange.

The tension between the two views

Olson shows why more stable authority can be better than fragmented predation. Scott shows why more central capacity is not always better. A strong state can provide security, health, infrastructure, and rights; it can also impose a disastrous model at enormous scale. Durable power therefore requires feedback from below, room for local adaptation, and institutions that let practical knowledge challenge official categories.

Where they differ from Jiang

Neither theory needs a heroic founding group. Olson begins with the incentives of coercive rulers and organized interests. Scott begins with information and administrative vision. Decline can occur in a highly disciplined, cohesive state if entrenched groups capture policy or if the centre becomes exceptionally capable of carrying out the wrong plan.

Modern connection

Every dashboard hides reality as well as revealing it. Schools teach to measured outcomes, hospitals prioritize coded activities, and governments fund what can be counted. The answer is not to abandon measurement. It is to ask which knowledge disappears when a target becomes official, who can challenge the model, and whether small failures are allowed to correct the plan before the plan becomes national.

Viewpoint 5: Tilly and Fearon - war-making and strategic bargaining

Key works: Charles Tilly's *Coercion, Capital, and European States*; James Fearon's "Rationalist Explanations for War"

Core claim: Competition and war push rulers to build taxation, administration, and credit, while wars also occur because information, commitment, and bargaining problems prevent mutually preferable settlements.

Direct links: [Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*](#) | [Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War"](#) | [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Game Theory](#)

War made states, and states made war

Tilly's famous formulation describes a historical process, not a recommendation. European rulers competing in war needed soldiers, weapons, food, transport, fortifications, and credit. To obtain them repeatedly, rulers built tax offices, records, courts, treasuries, supply systems, and organizations capable of reaching into society. They bargained with landowners, merchants, towns, and financiers. Those bargains shaped rights and representative institutions as well as coercion.

Different balances of capital and coercion produced different state forms. Commercial centres could lend money; land-based rulers could draw on agricultural and military hierarchies. States that failed to mobilize resources were conquered, absorbed, or marginalized. The survivors were not necessarily the most cohesive societies. They were the political organizations that could sustain extraction, borrowing, logistics, and battlefield adaptation under intense competition.

This view explains why external danger can strengthen a state, but it also reveals the human cost. Taxes, conscription, displacement, and warfare were not neutral tools of modernization. State capacity often grew through violence imposed on people who had little control over the project. A state can become stronger while many subjects become less secure.

The bargaining puzzle of war

Fearon supplies the most literal game-theory lens in this guide. War is costly, so two rivals should normally prefer some negotiated division of the disputed stakes to paying the cost of fighting. Why, then, do rational actors fail to bargain? Fearon identifies three families of problems. **Private information** gives states an incentive to exaggerate strength or resolve. **Commitment problems** arise when a future shift in power makes today's promise unbelievable. **Indivisibility** arises when actors believe an issue cannot be divided or traded, although many supposedly indivisible stakes can be reframed.

Domestic politics can worsen every problem. Leaders may receive private benefits from conflict, fear punishment for compromise, or conceal information. Allies can embolden one side or create uncertainty about who will join. A rising power may distrust assurances from a declining power; the declining power may prefer preventive war to a worse bargain later. Decline can therefore be relational: a state becomes less secure because the distribution of power changes, not because its society has lost cohesion.

How this changes the historical question

Instead of asking only why Macedon possessed more energy than the Greek city-states or Persia, ask how Philip II reorganized military extraction, how rival Greek coalitions failed to coordinate, what information each actor possessed, and which bargains could not be made credible. Instead of treating an empire as one mind, identify rulers, generals, financiers, cities, allies, and subject peoples with different payoffs.

Modern connection

When people say “the national interest,” ask whose payoff is being described. Then identify the players, their strategies, information, timing, and credible commitments. This method is narrower than a civilizational cycle, but it prevents a metaphor from doing the work of an explanation. It also shows why institutions that share information, lock in agreements, and make concessions politically survivable can prevent costly conflict.

Viewpoint 6: Kennedy and the material base of power

Key work: Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*

Core claim: Military and political power rest on production, finance, technology, logistics, alliances, and the ability to sustain strategic commitments over time.

Direct links: [Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*](#) | [LSE retrospective on Kennedy's argument](#)

Relative power, not a moral life cycle

Kennedy follows great powers from 1500 onward through the relationship between their economic base and military commitments. Armies and navies consume production, revenue, skilled labour, technology, and credit. A state can fight beyond its immediate income if lenders trust it and its institutions can tax the future. It can also multiply its strength through allies. Conversely, a large population or economy may produce little usable strategic power if logistics, finance, energy, or command are weak.

“Imperial overstretch” occurs when obligations and ambitions grow faster than the base supporting them. The state must defend too many borders, colonies, sea lanes, allies, or commitments. Military spending then competes with investment that would sustain future production. A temporary emergency becomes a long-term structural burden. Relative decline can occur even while a country grows richer in absolute terms, because competitors grow faster or convert resources more efficiently.

This theory does not require elites to become lazy. A disciplined, innovative, patriotic society can still choose commitments it cannot afford, lose access to crucial inputs, face demographic burden, or be surpassed by a larger productive network. Nor does retreat necessarily mean collapse. Reducing commitments can preserve the core of power; an alliance can distribute costs; technological change can alter the balance.

What this viewpoint explains especially well

Kennedy is strongest when the outcome is **relative international power** rather than the disappearance of a civilization. He directs attention to fiscal flexibility, debt service, industrial depth, energy, demographics, technological diffusion, logistics, alliance quality, and opportunity cost. These factors turn “strength” from a personality trait into a budget constrained across time.

Where it differs from Jiang

Jiang asks who retains energy, openness, and cohesion. Kennedy asks what each power can produce and mobilize, for how long, at what cost, and relative to whom. The two can meet: factional politics may produce overstretch, and common purpose may make taxation easier. But material imbalance can generate decline even when solidarity remains strong.

Modern connection

Claims about the future of the United States, China, Germany, Japan, Israel, or any other power should specify the outcome and horizon. Territorial empire, rule-setting influence, technological leadership, economic autonomy, and social welfare are different things. A responsible forecast tracks indicators, compares rivals, assigns uncertainty, and distinguishes a country's capacity from a dramatic story about its destiny.

Viewpoint 7: Diamond and Tainter - environment, disease, and complexity

Key works: Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*; Joseph Tainter's *The Collapse of Complex Societies*

Core claim: Societies begin with unequal ecological and geographic opportunities, while mature systems can become vulnerable when each new layer of complexity costs more and solves less.

Direct links: [PBS, *Guns, Germs and Steel*](#) | [National Geographic interview with Jared Diamond](#) | [Excerpts from Tainter's *The Collapse of Complex Societies*](#)

Diamond: unequal boards before the game begins

Diamond asks why food production, dense populations, technologies, writing, political scale, and immunity developed unevenly across continents. His answer emphasizes domesticable plants and animals, continental axes that ease diffusion, population density, connected disease environments, and the accumulation of technology over long periods. Geography does not dictate every outcome, and critics argue that Diamond can understate institutions, culture, agency, and contingency. Yet the mechanisms matter because historical actors do not begin with equal boards.

The conquest of the Americas is the clearest example. Eurasian populations had lived for centuries in dense settlements near domesticated animals and carried pathogens to which Indigenous populations had no comparable immunity. Steel weapons, horses, oceanic transport, and writing emerged from long networks of exchange and competition. Indigenous alliances and Spanish strategy were essential, but epidemic disease and material history changed what every coalition could do.

This is a direct alternative to the idea that scarcity naturally creates the strongest competitors. Some constraints stimulate adaptation; others prevent populations from accumulating health, knowledge, infrastructure, and surplus. Many marginal groups remain marginal. Hardship can concentrate attention on an immediate problem while consuming the capacity needed for long-term planning. Research on scarcity and cognition similarly finds that poverty can tax mental bandwidth rather than acting as a reliable school of ingenuity: [Mani et al., "Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function"](#).

Tainter: diminishing returns to complexity

Tainter defines collapse as a rapid loss of sociopolitical complexity. Societies solve problems by adding specialists, hierarchies, information systems, infrastructure, armies, regulations, and administrative layers. These investments are often rational and initially produce large returns. Irrigation raises food supply; bureaucracy coordinates taxation; walls improve security; technical specialists solve problems that local households cannot.

Over time, the next layer may cost more while producing less. A larger bureaucracy must be funded to manage the bureaucracy already in place. More distant resources require longer supply lines. New rules interact with old rules. Maintenance crowds out investment. A shock - drought, invasion, epidemic, energy shortage, fiscal crisis, or political conflict - then strikes a system whose complexity has become expensive to sustain.

Tainter's account resembles the bureaucratic stage in a civilizational cycle but removes the moral judgment. Complexity is not automatically corruption, and simplification is not always extinction. A central government can fragment while local communities continue; people may abandon expensive institutions and reorganize at a smaller scale. What looks like “collapse” from the palace may feel different in a village that no longer supports the palace.

What these viewpoints explain especially well

Diamond explains long-run differences in starting conditions and the power of disease environments. Tainter explains vulnerability after institutions have accumulated. Together they cover causes that can operate without any prior loss of courage, openness, or shared identity. Climate, energy, food systems, pathogens, and infrastructure are not background scenery; they shape the possible strategies.

Modern connection

A complete assessment of resilience includes public health, food and water security, energy, climate exposure, supply chains, maintenance burdens, and whether complexity still produces value. The crucial question is not whether a society has become “soft.” It is whether its problem-solving institutions learn and adapt faster than the problems and maintenance costs compound.

Viewpoint 8: Anderson, Putnam, and Ostrom - identity without a saviour

Key works: Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*; Robert Putnam's work on social capital; Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons*

Core claim: Large communities are made through stories and institutions; durable cooperation depends on the kind of trust being built and on legitimate rules that people can monitor and revise.

Direct links: [Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* excerpt](#) | [Putnam's bonding and bridging distinction](#) | [Ostrom's Nobel-recognized work](#)

Anderson: how strangers imagine a “we”

Anderson agrees that political power depends on imagination. Members of a nation will never meet most fellow members, yet picture themselves as sharing a common time, territory, and story. He shifts attention away from a single poet or prophet toward the systems that reproduce identity every day: vernacular language, print capitalism, newspapers, novels, schools, maps, museums, censuses, ceremonies, markets, and administrative routines.

A community is “imagined” not because it is fake, but because its scale requires representation. Leaders can become symbols, yet the nation survives only if millions of ordinary interactions keep making it real. Several groups can also imagine incompatible communities across the same territory. A story that creates solidarity for one population may erase another. Identity explains sacrifice, but it can coordinate liberation, public service, conquest, or exclusion.

Putnam: bonding and bridging cohesion

Putnam distinguishes **bonding** social capital from **bridging** social capital. Bonding connects people who are already similar through dense loyalty and mutual aid. It is powerful in danger and can mobilize sacrifice quickly. Bridging connects across religion, ethnicity, class, region, or ideology. It spreads information, widens opportunity, and supports cooperation among people who do not share one intimate identity.

This distinction reveals that “more cohesion” is not always better. A faction, criminal network, extremist movement, or secret society may be extremely cohesive internally while destroying trust in the larger public. Bonding can suppress dissent and filter outside information. A country may contain many strong groups yet possess little national cooperation. The target is **layered cohesion**: local bonds for care, broad civic bridges for common action, and institutions that protect principled disagreement.

Ostrom: cooperation through rules from below

Ostrom studied communities that managed shared forests, fisheries, irrigation systems, and pastures without relying only on privatization or a distant central authority. Long-enduring systems often had clear boundaries, rules suited to local conditions, participation by affected users, accountable monitoring, graduated sanctions, low-cost conflict resolution, and recognition of the community's right to organize. Larger systems could be nested across several levels rather than controlled from one centre.

Her work offers a direct alternative to the heroic-leader solution. Cooperation can be designed into procedures that people regard as legitimate. Monitoring does not have to mean surveillance from above; it can be performed by users who understand the resource. Sanctions do not have to begin with expulsion; they can escalate with repeated violation. Disputes do not have to threaten the whole community if there is an accessible way to resolve them.

Ostrom's cases are not miniature empires, and rules for a village commons cannot simply be scaled to a continent. Their importance is conceptual: collective action is neither automatic nor dependent on one founding genius. Institutions can preserve cooperation across leadership changes.

Where this viewpoint differs from Jiang

Jiang is right that stories help scattered people coordinate. Anderson shows that stories are carried by media, schools, administration, and repeated ritual. Putnam shows that cohesion can undermine openness when it remains trapped inside one group. Ostrom shows how practical, revisable rules can sustain cooperation without permanent hardship or a saviour. The problem is not merely how to create a “we,” but how to build a “we” that can include difference and survive disagreement.

Modern connection

The strongest test of democratic cohesion is not whether everyone celebrates the same victory. It is whether people who lose an election, criticize a leader, or belong to a minority still believe they remain members of the same political community. Healthy solidarity says, “We can disagree without leaving the public.” Unhealthy solidarity says, “Agreement proves loyalty, and criticism proves betrayal.”

Synthesis: several causes at once

No single explanation accounts for every rise or collapse. The useful question is not “Which theory wins?” but “Which mechanism was active in this case, at this time?” Three examples show why the causes must be layered.

Three cases in brief

Case	Several explanations working together	What no single theory captures
Qin	Frontier competition, administrative reform, taxation, military rewards, and agricultural expansion	Capacity enabled conquest, but harsh extraction and weak succession undermined the dynasty
Macedon	Military innovation, fiscal organization, Philip's diplomacy, rival fragmentation, and Alexander's leadership	Expansion depended on organization and uncertain battles; durable succession was a separate problem
Tenochtitlan	Indigenous alliances, tributary resentment, siege, disease, weapons, and strategic bargaining	Conquest was coalition war inside a biological catastrophe, not a simple victory of one people over another

Supporting overviews: [Qin and China's first political unification](#); [the rise of Macedon](#); and [the Mexica and Tlaxcalan alliance](#).

Six systems to examine

Each viewpoint protects a distinct question that disappears when history is reduced to one cycle. Together they form a diagnostic model, not a law of destiny.

System	Core question	Typical strength	Typical failure
Coalition and legitimacy	Who accepts sacrifice for whom?	Broad, voluntary civic trust	Faction, exclusion, or coerced unity
Institutions and capacity	Can decisions be implemented and corrected?	Competent administration plus accountability	Predation, paralysis, or information failure
Material base	What can be produced, taxed, financed, and supplied?	Productive depth and fiscal resilience	Debt, extraction, or logistical breakdown
External environment	Which rivals, allies, technologies, diseases, and ecologies shape options?	Learning networks and manageable commitments	Overstretch, isolation, or shock exposure
Elite and social structure	Are security, mobility, and status distributed sustainably?	Open entry and legitimate competition	Elite overproduction, immiseration, blocked mobility
Narrative and learning	Can the society imagine a common future and absorb bad news?	Bridging identity and protected dissent	Propaganda, groupthink, or loss of common reality

How the systems interact

Rise becomes self-reinforcing when legitimate cooperation supports taxation and public goods; public goods strengthen production and trust; open access recruits talent; criticism improves learning; and administration converts resources into durable capacity. Decline becomes self-reinforcing when fiscal stress weakens services, elites fight over shrinking rewards, factions hide bad news, adaptation slows, and external rivals exploit the resulting division.

Neither direction is inevitable. A cohesive group may lack resources; a capable bureaucracy may serve a narrow elite; a productive economy may be overwhelmed by disease or war. States can interrupt decline by reopening opportunity, protecting honest information, renewing productive capacity, limiting extraction, and allowing peaceful correction.

Central takeaway: Success becomes dangerous when it closes entry, hides error, privatizes reward, and spreads the cost across everyone else. The answer is not permanent hardship; it is preserving learning, shared stakes, and correction after success.

Final synthesis

Jiang's strongest insight is that land, money, weapons, and population are only potential power. A state must still motivate people, learn, transmit information, and coordinate action. Success can change incentives: offices become protected rewards, factions profit by weakening the public system, and outsiders gain leverage inside a divided centre.

The wider research shows that there is no universal clock of rise and fall. Solidarity matters, but so do institutions, administrative capacity, living standards, elite competition, taxation, finance, war, bargaining, geography, disease, ecology, complexity, identity, and local cooperation. States rise when several of these systems reinforce one another. They decline when failure crosses from one system into others and correction becomes harder than denial. The clearest final question is therefore: **What are powerful actors rewarded for doing, and does their success strengthen or weaken the wider system on which they depend?**

Educational reading guide; historical interpretations remain contested.