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The Second Superpower Rears its Beautiful Head

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As the United States government becomes more belligerent in using its power in the world, many people are longing for a "second superpower" that can keep the US in check. Indeed, many people desire a superpower that speaks for the interests of planetary society, for long-term well-being, and that encourages broad participation in the democratic process. Where can the world find such a second superpower? No nation or group of nations seems able to play this role, although the European Union sometimes seeks to, working in concert with a variety of institutions in the field of international law, including the United Nations. But even the common might of the European nations is barely a match for the current power of the United States.

There is an emerging second superpower, but it is not a nation. Instead, it is a new form of international player, constituted by the "will of the people" in a global social movement. The beautiful but deeply agitated face of this second superpower is the worldwide peace campaign, but the body of the movement is made up of millions of people concerned with a broad agenda that includes social development, environmentalism, health, and human rights. This movement has a surprisingly agile and muscular body of citizen activists who identify their interests with world society as a whole—and who recognize that at a fundamental level we are all one. These are people who are attempting to take into account the needs and dreams of all 6.3 billion people in the world—and not just the members of one or another nation. Consider the members of Amnesty International who write letters on behalf of prisoners of conscience, and the millions of Americans who are participating in email actions against the war in Iraq. Or the physicians who contribute their time to Doctors Without Borders/ Medecins Sans Frontieres.

While some of the leaders have become highly visible, what is perhaps most interesting about this global movement is that it is not really directed by visible leaders, but, as we will see, by the collective, emergent

action of its millions of participants. Surveys suggest that at least 30 million people in the United States identify themselves this way—approximately 10% of the US population. The percentage in Europe is undoubtedly higher. The global membership in Asia, South America, Africa and India, while much lower in percentage of the total population, is growing quickly with the spread of the Internet. What makes these numbers important is the new cyberspace-enabled interconnection among the members. This body has a beautiful mind. Web connections enable a kind of near-instantaneous, mass improvisation of activist initiatives. For example, the political activist group Moveon.org, which specializes in rapid response campaigns, has an email list of more than two million members. During the 2002 elections, Moveon.org raised more than $700,000 in a few days for a candidate's campaign for the US senate. It has raised thousands of dollars for media ads for peace—and it is now amassing a worldwide network of media activists dedicated to keeping the mass media honest by identifying bias and confronting local broadcasters.

New forms of communication and commentary are being invented continuously. Slashdot and other news sites present high quality peer-reviewed commentary by involving large numbers of members of the web community in recommending and rating items. Text messaging on mobile phones, or texting, is now the medium of choice for communicating with thousands of demonstrators simultaneously during mass protests. Instant messaging turns out to be one of the most popular methods for staying connected in the developing world, because it requires only a bit of bandwidth, and provides an intimate sense of connection across time and space. The current enthusiasm for blogging is changing the way that people relate to publication, as it allows realtime dialogue about world events as bloggers log in daily to share their insights. Meta-blogging sites crawl across thousands of blogs, identifying popular links, noting emergent topics, and providing an instantaneous summary of the global consciousness of the second superpower.

The Internet and other interactive media continue to penetrate more and more deeply all world society, and provide a means for instantaneous personal dialogue and communication across the globe. The collective power of texting, blogging, instant messaging, and email across millions of actors cannot be overestimated. Like a mind constituted of millions of inter-

networked neurons, the social movement is capable of astonishingly rapid and sometimes subtle community consciousness and action.

Thus the new superpower demonstrates a new form of "emergent democracy" that differs from the participative democracy of the US government. Where political participation in the United States is exercised mainly through rare exercises of voting, participation in the second superpower movement occurs continuously through participation in a variety of web-enabled initiatives. And where deliberation in the first superpower is done primarily by a few elected or appointed officials, deliberation in the second superpower is done by each individual—making sense of events, communicating with others, and deciding whether and how to join in community actions. Finally, where participation in democracy in the first superpower feels remote to most citizens, the emergent democracy of the second superpower is alive with touching and being touched by each other, as the community works to create wisdom and to take action.

How does the second superpower take action? Not from the top, but from the bottom. That is, it is the strength of the US government that it can centrally collect taxes, and then spend, for example, $1.2 billion on 1,200 cruise missiles in the first day of the war against Iraq. By contrast, it is the strength of the second superpower that it could mobilize hundreds of small groups of activists to shut down city centers across the United States on that same first day of the war. And that millions of citizens worldwide would take to their streets to rally. The symbol of the first superpower is the eagle—an awesome predator that rules from the skies, preying on mice and small animals. Perhaps the best symbol for the second superpower would be a community of ants. Ants rule from below. And while I may be awed seeing eagles in flight, when ants invade my kitchen they command my attention.

In the same sense as the ants, the continual distributed action of the members of the second superpower can, I believe, be expected to eventually prevail. Distributed mass behavior, expressed in rallying, in voting, in picketing, in exposing corruption, and in purchases from particular companies, all have a profound effect on the nature of future society. More effect, I would argue, than the devastating but unsustainable effect of bombs and other forms of coercion.

Deliberation in the first superpower is relatively formal—dictated by the US constitution and by years of legislation, adjudicating, and precedent. The realpolitik of decision making in the first superpower—as opposed to what is taught in civics class—centers around lobbying and campaign contributions by moneyed special interests—big oil, the military-industrial complex, big agriculture, and big drugs—to mention only a few. In many cases, what are acted upon are issues for which some group is willing to spend lavishly. By contrast, it is difficult in the US government system to champion policy goals that have broad, long-term value for many citizens, such as environment, poverty reduction and third world development, women's rights, human rights, health care for all. By contrast, these are precisely the issues to which the second superpower tends to address its attention.

Deliberation in the second superpower is evolving rapidly in both cultural and technological terms. It is difficult to know its present state, and impossible to see its future. But one can say certain things. It is stunning how quickly the community can act—especially when compared to government systems. The Internet, in combination with traditional press and television and radio media, creates a kind of "media space" of global dialogue. Ideas arise in the global media space. Some of them catch hold and are disseminated widely. Their dissemination, like the beat of dance music spreading across a sea of dancers, becomes a pattern across the community. Some members of the community study these patterns, and write about some of them. This has the effect of both amplifying the patterns and facilitating community reflection on the topics highlighted. A new form of deliberation happens. A variety of what we might call "action agents" sits figuratively astride the community, with mechanisms designed to turn a given social movement into specific kinds of action in the world. For example, fundraisers send out mass appeals, with direct mail or the Internet, and if they are tapping into a live issue, they can raise money very quickly. This money in turn can be used to support activities consistent with an emerging mission.

The process is not without its flaws and weaknesses. For example, the central role of the mass media—with its alleged biases and distortions—is a real issue. Much news of the war comes to members of the second superpower from CNN, Fox, and the New York Times, despite the

availability of alternative sources. The study of the nature and limits of this big mind is just beginning, and we don't know its strengths and weaknesses as well as we do those of more traditional democracy. Perhaps governance is the wrong way to frame this study. Rather, what we are embarked on is a kind of experimental neurology, as our communication tools continue to evolve and to rewire the processes by which the community does its shared thinking and feeling. One of the more interesting questions posed to political scientists studying the second superpower is to what extent the community's long-term orientation and freedom from special interests is reinforced by the peer-to-peer nature of web-centered ways of communicating—and whether these tendencies can be intentionally fostered through the design of the technology.

Which brings us to the most important point: the vital role of the individual. The shared, collective mind of the second superpower is made up of many individual human minds—your mind and my mind—together we create the movement. In traditional democracy our minds don't matter much—what matters are the minds of those with power of position, and the minds of those that staff and lobby them. In the emergent democracy of the second superpower, each of our minds matters a lot. For example, any one of us can launch an idea. Any one of us can write a blog, send out an email, create a list. Not every idea will take hold in the big mind of the second superpower—but the one that eventually catches fire is started by an individual. And in the peer-oriented world of the second superpower, many more of us have the opportunity to craft submissions, and take a shot.

The contrast goes deeper. In traditional democracy, sense-making moves from top to bottom. "The President must know more than he is saying" goes the thinking of a loyal but passive member of the first superpower. But this form of democracy was established in the 18th century, when education and information were both scarce resources. Now, in more and more of the world, people are well educated and informed. As such, they prefer to make up their own minds. Top-down sense-making is out of touch with modern people.

The second superpower, emerging in the 21st century, depends upon educated informed members. In the community of the second superpower each of us is responsible for our own sense-making. We seek as much data—raw facts, direct experience—as we can, and then we make up our

own minds. Even the current fascination with "reality television" speaks to this desire: we prefer to watch our fellows, and decide ourselves "what's the story" rather than watching actors and actresses play out a story written by someone else. The same, increasingly, is true of the political stage—hence the attractiveness of participation in the second superpower to individuals.

Now the response of many readers will be that this is a wishful fantasy. What, you say, is the demonstrated success of this second superpower? After all, George Bush was almost single-handedly able to make war on Iraq, and the global protest movement was in the end only able to slow him down. Where was the second superpower?

The answer is that the second superpower is not currently able to match the first. On the other hand, the situation may be more promising than we realize. Most important is that the establishment of international institutions and international rule of law has created a venue in which the second superpower can join with sympathetic nations to successfully confront the United States. Consider the international effort to ban landmines. Landmines are cheap, deadly, and often used against agrarian groups because they make working the fields lethal, and sew quite literally the seeds of starvation. In the 1990s a coalition of NGOs coordinated by Jody Williams, Bobby Muller and others managed to put this issue at the top of the international agenda, and promote the establishment of the treaty banning their use. For this, the groups involved were awarded the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. While the United States has so far refused to sign the treaty, it has been highly isolated on the issue and there is still hope that some future congress and president will do so.

At the Kyoto meetings on global climate change, a group of NGOs coordinated by Nancy Keat of the World Resources Institute joined with developing nations to block the interests of the United States and its ally, big oil. The only way for the United States to avoid being checkmated was to leave the game entirely. In the World Trade Organization, the second superpower famously shut down the Seattle meeting in 1999, and later helped to force a special "development round" focused on the needs of poor countries. That round is currently underway—and while the United States and others are seeking to subvert the second superpower agenda, the best they have achieved to date is stalemate.

And finally, while George Bush was indeed able to go to war with Iraq, the only way he could do so was to ignore international law and split with the United Nations. Had he stayed within the system of international institutions, his aims likely would have been frustrated. The French and the Germans who led the attempt to stop him could not, I believe, have done what they did without the strength of public opinion prodding them—the second superpower in action.

Now we all know that the Bush administration has decided to undermine, in many cases, the system of international law. Some argue that by pulling out, the administration has fatally damaged the international system, and ushered in a new era where the United States determines the rules—hub and spoke style—through bilateral deals with other nations. The result, some will say, is that the second superpower no longer has a venue in which to meet the first effectively. In my view this is an overly pessimistic assessment—albeit one that members of the second superpower need to take seriously and strive to render false by our success in supporting international institutions.

International law and institutions are not going away. Too many parties want and need them. First, individuals around the world are becoming more globally aware, and more interested in international institutions. Global media, travel, and immigration all contribute to citizens being aware of the benefits of consistent approaches to everything from passport control to human rights. It is striking, for example, that up until the final days before the war, a majority of the US population wanted the president to deal with Iraq in concert with the United Nations. Second, business organizations want global rule of law. Global trade is now central to a vast majority of businesses and almost all nations—and such trade requires rules administered by multilateral bodies. Third, most nations want a global legal system. In particular, European nations, wary of war, outclassed in one-on-one power confrontations with the United States, have become strongly committed to a post-national world. They are pouring collective national resources of enormous magnitude into continuously strengthening the international system.

The key problem facing international institutions is that they have few ways to enforce their will on a recalcitrant US government. And this is where the second superpower is a part of the solution. Enforcement has

many dimensions. When the United States opts to avoid or undermine international institutions, the second superpower can harass and embarrass it with demonstrations and public education campaigns. The second superpower can put pressure on politicians around the world to stiffen their resolve to confront the US government in any ways possible. And the second superpower can also target US politicians and work to remove at the polls those who support the administration's undercutting of international law.

Longer term, we must press for a direct voice for the second superpower in international institutions, so that we are not always forced to work through nations. This means, as a practical matter, a voice for citizens, and for NGOs and "civil society" organizations. For example, the Access Initiative of the World Resources Institute is working to give citizens' groups the ability to influence environmental decisions made by international organizations such as the World Bank. The Digital Opportunity Task Force of the G8 group of nations included a formal role for civil society organizations, as does the United Nations Information and Communications Technology Task Force.

Overall, what can be said for the prospects of the second superpower? With its mind enhanced by Internet connective tissue, and international law as a venue to work with others for progressive action, the second superpower is starting to demonstrate its potential. But there is much to do. How do we assure that it continues to gain in strength? And at least as important, how do we continue to develop the mind of the second superpower, so that it maximizes wisdom and goodwill? The future, as they say, is in our hands. We need to join together to help the second superpower, itself, grow stronger.

First, we need to become conscious of the "mental processes" in which we are involved as members of the second superpower, and explore how to make our individual sense-making and collective action more and more effective. This of course means challenging and improving the mass media, and supporting more interactive and less biased alternatives. But more ambitiously, we will need to develop a kind of meta-discipline, an organizational psychology of our community, to explore the nature of our web-enabled, person-centered, global governance and communication processes, and continue to improve them.

Second, and ironically, the future of the second superpower depends to a great extent on social freedoms in part determined by the first superpower. It is the traditional freedoms—freedom of the press, of assembly, of speech—that have enabled the second superpower to take root and grow. Indeed, the Internet itself was constructed by the US government, and the government could theoretically still step in to restrict its freedoms. So we need to pay close attention to freedom in society, and especially to freedom of the Internet. There are many moves afoot to censor the web, to close down access, and to restrict privacy and free assembly in cyberspace. While we generally associate web censorship with countries like China or Saudi Arabia, tighter control of the web is also being explored in the United States and Europe. The officials of the first superpower are promoting these ideas in the name of preventing terrorism, but they also prevent the open peer-to-peer communication that is at the heart of the second superpower. We need to insist on an open web, an open cyberspace, around the globe, because that is the essential medium in which the second superpower lives.

Third, we must carefully consider how best to support international institutions, so that they collectively form a setting in which our power can be exercised. Perhaps too often we attack institutions like the World Bank that might, under the right conditions, actually become partners with us in dealing with the first superpower. International institutions must become deeply more transparent, accessible to the public, and less amenable to special interests, while remaining strong enough to provide a secure context in which our views can be expressed.

And finally, we must work on ourselves and our community. We will dialogue with our neighbors, knowing that the collective wisdom of the second superpower is grounded in the individual wisdom within each of us. We must remind ourselves that daily we make personal choices about the world we create for ourselves and our descendants. We do not have to create a world where differences are resolved by war. It is not our destiny to live in a world of destruction, tedium, and tragedy. We will create a world of peace.