“Zones of peace” are neither necessary nor sufficient to produce democracies but, as demonstrated in the preceding chapter, they have been facilitative in fostering the development of liberal republican institutions and democratization. Similarly, the absence of peaceful environments has thwarted movements toward liberal democratization. When conflict diminishment tendencies have preceded the attainment of democratic status, we should be careful in attributing causality to the more recent development. It is of course conceivable that the relationship between democratic states and altered conflict propensities is reciprocal; but it is also possible that other variables are necessary to explain the origins of diminished probabilities of war between certain states.

One of the hitherto missing pieces of the puzzle pertains to the issue of regional primacy. Geopolitics must be given its proper due. The creation of zones of peace or areas in which states are much less likely to go to war with one another has as much, and perhaps more, to do with the settlement of, or restraints imposed on, regional primacy questions as it does the type of political system. In essence, most of the states that became (and remained) democratic in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had created or found themselves in relatively cooperative niches that insulated them from extremely competitive, regional international politics. The various ways in which these niches were established had important and positive implications for the likelihood of domestic democratization processes. Usually, the niches preceded substantial progress in democratization and, short of outright invasion, it is the geopolitical circumstances leading to the evolution of the niches that deserves some share of the responsibility for the consequences of diminished conflict probabilities among democracies.

The next section elaborates the rationale for the regional primacy argument. In a following section, four cases (Scandinavia, Revolutionary France, North America, and Taisho Japan) are reviewed. Two of the cases (France and Japan) represent situations in which fledgling democratization processes were suppressed by efforts to attain regional hegemony. The other two cases (Scandinavia and North America) show how democratization
was facilitated (and war between democracies made less likely) by situations in which the pursuit of regional hegemony was either exhausted early or constrained by extra-regional circumstances.

The Regional Primacy Angle

As we have seen in chapter two, a basic premise of the war making/state making perspective is that more liberal ruling arrangements tend to stem from exchanges with segments of the population made by war-making rulers hard-pressed for finances and manpower. The rulers offered or were forced to surrender various degrees of political participation in exchange for the resources they needed to make and prepare for war. Initially, these exchanges tended to be restricted to bargaining within elite groups. Gradually, and increasingly so after the late eighteenth century, exchanges of manpower, taxes, and compliance for some semblance of political participation were extended to larger proportions of the adult population. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not coincidentally, the scope of these franchise extensions depended in part on expansions in the number of people regarded as important to war making efforts, either as conscripts or war industry workers, and capable of paying taxes. How bureaucratized states became and precisely with whom (barons, merchants, peasants) rulers made their deals also depended on varying circumstances such as location, military technology, political economy, and the scale of warfare. Different types of political systems emerged as a consequence.

For instance, states that were heavily involved in trade could rely on customs levies to raise money for war purposes more easily than states that depended on taxing the more difficult-to-assess agrarian production and assets. Less bureaucracy would be anticipated in the former as opposed to the latter types of states. Similarly, states that could rely on natural defenses such as maritime barriers as opposed to large standing armies were less likely to develop authoritarian formulas for maintaining the defense of the realm. Alternatively, states dependent on cavalry levies for their military force were more likely to develop feudal arrangements. A powerful landed elite and a high degree of concentration in landholding were two likely consequences.

Whether a state’s nobility maintained its concentrated powers and privilege depended in part on whether rulers could and/or needed to make different arrangements with other societal groups such as an emerging middle class or even the peasantry. Defeat in warfare was one of the more important factors in prompting reconsiderations of the wisdom of prevailing domestic winning coalitions. Defeat often opened opportunities, at least, for dismantling incumbent regimes and trial-and-error searches for new ruling formulas. Success in warfare and the expansion of state and empire, in contrast, tended to solidify the mutual dependence of the nobility and ruler—thereby diminishing the probability of occasions arising in which elites would have incentives to mobilize new political forces for political conflict.