

“If the transition to a new power structure is abrupt or uneven, or if it is difficult for leaders to ascertain what exactly has come to pass, then the risk of conflict will increase.”

## Power Shuffle: Will the Coming Transition Be Peaceful?

ERIK GARTZKE

The world is changing. New relationships and animosities are emerging as the fulcrum of global power migrates eastward. The new world order will reveal itself in time. Meanwhile, I am as uncertain as anyone else about the future structure of world politics. China, India, or perhaps even Russia could eventually supplant the United States as a hegemon. Alternately, it is possible that parity will ensue as the United States, or a US-led coalition, balances one or several rising Asian powers.

I am confident, however, of one thing: Whatever multipolarity might mean for international relations in general, the important question for matters of war, peace, and stability is how the new system evolves, not what it is like when we get there. The more confusing the transition of power, the more likely it will be accompanied by a major-power war.

Change breeds uncertainty. Thoughtful observers can offer as many possible paths for our collective future as there are opportunities to be thoughtful. Optimists point to the extraordinary peace and stability that have characterized relations among developed nations since the last world war. Pessimists emphasize contrasting tendencies: Peace, if common among countries, is rare in international systems.

But to a degree not anticipated by traditional perspectives on international affairs, the nature of tomorrow hangs on the very veil that stands between us and knowledge of the future. Not knowing allows the possibility of danger, but, more than this, ignorance itself can produce the perils that we imagine lurk ahead of us. Fear is

dangerous not just for what might be, but for what the fear might create through our anxious actions. In the absence of sound theories or compelling evidence, we are forced to imagine many possibilities that might come for us out of the darkness.

Indeed, a growing consensus among students of war says that great danger comes from unknowns. Ignorance causes leaders to err, which in turn can lead to war and lesser violent contests. There is reason, therefore, to be concerned about an inability to manage fear and uncertainty effectively. Changes in the structure or hierarchy of international politics are much less a problem in themselves than is the uncertainty that can shroud what that structure might be, and how it will evolve.

### MISSING INFORMATION

To avoid major war in coming decades, the United States and other nations must be able to agree on what is happening in the international system. Differences or dissatisfactions about these changes are problematic, but much less so if states agree on what has occurred or will come to pass. Multipolarity, in this light, is no more menacing than hegemony, bipolarity, or other arrangements of world power. It is nations' difficulty in anticipating a new world order that promises to make any coming transition rocky.

Yet nations have good reasons to withhold or manipulate information about an evolving world system. The structure of international power determines what countries get, and what they must concede. Nations perceived to be powerful are given greater discretion in world affairs. To the degree that power relations are ambiguous, this benefits status quo powers that already have much of what they desire.

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In particular, a power in decline relative to other powers may be tempted to use its remaining capabilities and influence to obscure power relations in an attempt to maintain material and leadership advantages. In the current global environment, making power relations more transparent may mean hastening America's relative decline, something that will be difficult for the United States to accept gracefully. But encouraging uncertainty about the nature of the transition would raise the risk that war may be necessary to resolve different estimates of the true balance of power.

## WHY THEY FIGHT

Scholars have advanced almost every conceivable relationship between the number of poles (centers of power) in the world and the risk of war. Some realists prefer bipolar systems, since fewer poles make it easier to identify balances of power. Others see multipolar systems as stabilizing, since the prospect of fighting a majority coalition deters aggression. Still other scholars see parity as the problem, arguing that war is more likely when nations are comparable in power.

In all likelihood, little or no relationship exists between the number of poles in a system, or parity (or disparity for that matter), and major war. Careful scholarship by a number of researchers has shown that bipolar systems are no more (or less) peaceful than multipolar systems, and that parity, while a bit more conflict-prone, is only marginally associated with additional conflict.

Realists are fond of pointing out that the United States and the Soviet Union never went to war (bipolar stability). Yet no major-power war occurred in Europe in the 40 years before World War I, either (multipolar stability). Most likely, the reason for peace in both periods was a widespread consensus regarding the structure of international power. It mattered much more that nations all agreed on who was in charge, than that they were confronted by a particular arrangement of powerful poles or persistent parities.

Transitions in the structure of power, on the other hand, have been closely associated with major war throughout recorded history. In *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides blamed extended conflict among the ancient Greeks on the

Athenian rise to power as a commercial empire, threatening the leadership of Sparta. A succession of European powers from the fourteenth through the twentieth centuries fought great contests to cement, or prevent, the succession of power.

Nations that fight wars do so temporarily. When they have worked out their differences, they stop fighting. Occasionally, one side or the other completely defeats its opponent militarily, but more often the losers accept defeat before they are conquered. The fact that most wars end with the acknowledgement of loser status is an important clue to the reasons that wars begin, since acknowledging that one is going to be the loser before a war begins is tantamount to peace. The difference between nations that fight, and those that do not, is that the latter are able to agree on what would happen eventually as a result of fighting, while the former cannot agree.

Why does dangerous uncertainty persist among nations? National hubris may cause leaders to exaggerate their countries' power, or expectations of resolve may differ. In any case, war forces an end to this uncertainty, so that at the end of a conflict nations have the best available information about the balance of power.

Clausewitz wrote of the fog of war, but really a fog in peacetime brings on wars.

Skillful leaders judge well when information is scant, in knowing the minds of other leaders, and in correctly assessing risks and opportunities. Less skillful leaders make mistakes. But no one has complete information. International affairs in this respect are like a game of poker: Players conceal some of their cards. They do this because it provides advantages over competitors. If every leader could see every other nation's cards, international politics would be both dull and safe. But that is not how the game works.

## THE UNCERTAINTY DILEMMA

Consider the classic problem of the security dilemma. In a world in which it is possible that nations will act through force, security is provided by measures that are essentially indistinguishable from the actions of aggressors. Building up one's military forces or forming alliances might protect a nation from attack, but it can also frighten other nations, forcing them to adopt similar measures. The cycle of fear and overreaction can result in a

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conflict spiral, even if war was not really the intent of any country.

In fact, the security dilemma is not about security so much as uncertainty. War often ensues not because of relative power or security, but because opponents cannot tell which states have hostile intentions and which do not. Being unsure—and cautious—can make war more likely, not less.

The solution to this dilemma would appear to be better information about which states possess hostile intentions. But, of course, hostile states have incentives to conceal this information, while states with benign intentions cannot clearly demonstrate that they pose no threat without at the same time making themselves vulnerable to attack from states that do in fact mean harm. The real dilemma is that aggressors benefit by concealing their status as aggressors, while non-aggressors cannot be believed if they build up their defenses.

Modern scholarship refers to this situation as a pooling problem. Pooling can be resolved in one of two ways. First, a mutual incentive to find efficient ways of resolving differences creates opportunities to cooperate. Avoiding war is in itself a mutual benefit, as long as fighting is costly for all involved.

Second, nations do not need to conceal their intentions if their interests are similar. Nations that have compatible goals can cooperate because there is little to be gained from fighting. Students of international relations have traditionally been skeptical that such affinities among nations can last, but today scholars and political practitioners are increasingly aware that more and more international interaction is non-zero-sum. Globalization has increased the mutual benefits of cooperation.

### THE HEGEMON'S QUANDARY

Historically, hegemonies have been reluctant to cede power. Relinquishing control was tantamount to a significant drop in national income and prestige. At the same time, rising powers could not be assisted because they were enemies. War, while not inevitable, was made more likely by the fact that fundamental tensions existed among competing powers. Earlier international systems encouraged conflict, if they did not require it.

The planet today may not be the sort of place where competition among powers makes conflict a regular feature of world affairs, but the transition to a new system inevitably introduces danger. Thus, the emergence of a multipolar international environment may prove risky not because mul-

tiples centers of power are significantly more dangerous than one or two, but because the United States and its major allies may resist the transition to such a structure.

While resistance to change is not futile, it would increase uncertainty about whether the transition will succeed and what form the international balance of power will finally take. The paradox is that the more likely the United States is to succeed at retaining power, the greater the risk that major war will be needed to decide which structure, indeed, takes hold.

If this assessment is correct, Washington can ensure peace and international stability either by facilitating the inevitable transition—by helping to give rising powers greater prominence in global leadership—or by making it clear that no such transition will take place. Either action would reduce uncertainty and increase international transparency.

The latter scenario seems unlikely at present, given economic and demographic trends, but it is possible that the United States will remain the clearly dominant political and military power, perhaps if rising Asian nations experience destabilizing economic setbacks. In the meantime, America must decide whether to engage rising powers such as China or attempt to contain the potential challengers. It is important to note that a compromise (partial engagement and incomplete containment) is probably the worst of both worlds, because it increases uncertainty.

### THE BRITISH PRECEDENT

There is precedent for a successful policy of engagement in hegemonic transition. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Great Britain found it could work with the nouveau riche United States. Unlike in preceding transitions, protagonists did not become antagonists because they had so much in common. The United States, late to the European-led game of imperial enterprise, quickly discovered that conquest did not pay. America, after fiascos in Cuba and the Philippines, was happy to be a commercial, rather than imperial, power.

Britain, too, found that the promotion of free commerce served its interests. As the world's largest trading power, the United Kingdom benefited disproportionately from encouraging a system of reciprocal access to national and colonial markets. Market economics rapidly made control of territory much less important than access to con-

sumers. Promoting the prosperity of dependent powers further weakened the appeal of colonial administration. Thus the United States was able to peacefully assume the mantle of hegemon because the two powers had developed compatible international objectives through a common system of global commerce.

Under British hegemony, the United States had obtained much of what it wanted from the established world order, and it enjoyed the additional benefit of not having to pay the high price of policing a system that was largely acceptable. The United States could free-ride on British efforts to manage a market-based global economy. The British, meanwhile, respected the US sphere of influence in the Americas, while the United States had no interest in controlling traditional British spheres of influence in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia, as long as American manufacturers retained access to commercial markets in these regions.

This system, though it included numerous colonial holdings, was not all that different from the one that the United States preferred and eventually sponsored. Indeed, the problem from an international perspective was that America was reluctant to inherit hegemony. The United States persisted as a largely demilitarized power until World War II, despite the fact that the United Kingdom's relative decline was taxing its ability to sustain the system from which the United States benefited. Only in the aftermath of World War II, when it became clear that Britain could no longer manage the global system, did the United States decide to run the world.

More important than British decline, however, was the fact that the Soviet Union posed the chief alternative to American hegemony. Recognition of the increasing importance of global public goods to its own and other nations' prosperity, and cognizance of the consequences of a Soviet-led system, forced the United States to dramatically shift its foreign policy and assume the position of global leadership.

It is tempting to conclude that the peaceful transition from British to US hegemony was the result of a common Anglo culture, or of unique characteristics of the United States as a nation. But Anglo amity had not prevented the American Revolution, nor had a common Anglo culture

stopped the Union and the Confederacy from fighting the deadliest contest in US history. And while it is possible that American accession to hegemony was exceptional, one must hope this is not the case, given the inevitability that the United States will someday be replaced as hegemon.

## THE RISE OF THE REST

For a time in the post-World War II period, it appeared that the Soviet Union might surpass the United States. In retrospect, those fears appear wildly misplaced, but they exemplify the power of uncertainty as a determinant of international affairs. Not knowing caused the United States to be more defensive than was perhaps necessary, while uncertainty supplied the Soviets with ammunition that made them more effective than if the truth had been fully known. World War III was avoided thanks to luck and caution, rather than averted as a product of power relations and system structure.

For a time in the 1980s strategic thinkers contemplated a succession by Europe or Japan. Anglo culture, incidentally, cannot explain how the United States and other powers addressed debate over the prospect of these transitions. While there was considerable anxiety in the United States about commercial competition, there was never a serious suggestion that Japanese or European aspirations constituted a real threat to the security of the United States. Europe was at peace with itself, while the Japanese seemed more eager to copy the United States commercially than to eclipse it politically.

Again, a power transition between the United States and its allies never came to pass, but it is exceedingly unlikely in any case that such a transition would have involved significant international violence. What emerged in the twentieth century, and what appears likely to persist in the twenty-first century, is the realization that commerce creates compatible interests among world powers. Other objectives remain in tension today; if substantial enough they could open up the opportunity for ambiguity, conflict, and possibly war. But a common commitment to global trade at least creates the basis for an important set of mutual or compatible interests among states.

America's fear is that a successor hegemon, or a group of powers enjoying dominance over

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different regions, might be inimical to US interests. Such hegemonies could alter or supplant the institutions and commercial, social, and political norms that have helped the United States govern a prosperous system and made America thrive as well. If hegemonic successors or competing coalitions are bound to want different things, then the United States may find that it prefers to resist the transition to a new configuration of power. If, in addition, the net effect of conflict is difficult to judge, then conflict itself will be more likely, since both sides in a dispute could expect that they might prevail in a fight.

Fortunately, there is reason to believe that the interests of current and future rivals for global power may not be incompatible. As with the Anglo-American transition, future power transitions may involve states that want very similar things from the international system.

Changes in the global economy since the late twentieth century have made global governance more important, valuable, and relatively neutral in terms of political conflict. The developed world, the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China), and other developing countries all benefit from institutions that promote trade, financial stability, and political consensus. The more that China, for example, becomes integrated into the global economic system, the more that its preferences will reflect objectives similar to those of the United States.

Indeed, development has led to a world system in which most candidates for regional or global power have common or compatible interests. Whereas in the past, power reflected an inherent incompatibility with other nations, today power derives from the very interactions that make nations more similar. If there is a good prospect that the world will remain peaceful, it is because the power now needed to run the world comes from cooperation, not from military conflict.

US actions in dealing with a transition to a new power structure thus pose a basic paradox. Engagement will make America's relative decline more likely, by helping a rising power to rise higher, or more quickly. But the rival in this case is more likely to share America's interests, and the transition to a new system is more likely to be peaceful. Containment of a rival could delay a transition from global unipolarity and slow the pace of rela-

tive US decline, but it might do so at the expense of international peace. At the very least, containment increases the odds that the rising competitor does not share objectives with the United States.

Perhaps the worst option, and also the most likely, is that the United States will adopt an ambiguous policy vis-à-vis rising powers. Ambiguity is doubly risky because it neither ensures that the competitors will have compatible interests nor effectively prevents a transition. More important, it introduces the very uncertainty that makes the game of international politics so potentially dangerous. If America is unsure of what it wants, or wants a bit of both worlds (continued hegemony but without too much risk of war), then it risks getting neither power nor stability. A compromise approach is the one most likely to lead to violent trouble during a transition in global leadership.

### THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALITY

It is possible, even likely, that no one power will manage to equal or supplant the United States. Instead, as America's ability to police the global system and provide public goods declines, several nations may try to share global leadership. This is a challenge because it requires collective management.

The record on such management in international affairs is not impressive. Groups of powers subject to incompatible interests or uncertainty exhibit all of the pathologies apparent in hegemonic succession, but they also face problems even when nations desire to cooperate. Nevertheless, the desire to cooperate, and the benefits of cooperation, may be more intense today and in the future than at other times in history. Surely if collective leadership can succeed, it will do so in a modern setting.

Multiple centers of power do complicate calculations of influence. This in itself does not prevent cooperation, but it makes the challenges greater and the likelihood of failure more realistic. If nations are in competition, then multipolarity probably complicates slightly the calculations needed to avoid warfare.

More important, if the nature of polarity is more fluid in a multipolar system (that is, if the centers of power themselves are less permanent, and their relationships are more dynamic), then leaders can more easily make errors, the world may begin to

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look more frightening, and the world could come to be at war.

If, however, globalization has created a world of powerful but compatible interests, then it may be that nations can overcome the challenges of governing collectively. In all likelihood, states will turn increasingly to international institutions to assist them in overcoming difficulties associated with collective action. These institutions are already helping the project of running the world by making cooperation more transparent and by overcoming problems of coordination (when nations want to cooperate but do not know how), or commitment (when nations want to cooperate at certain times but not at others).

Critical to evaluating the impact of polarity on peace and stability are the speed and volatility of changes in the international structure of power. If the transition is orderly and predictable, there is no reason to expect that a multipolar system would differ from other power structures in its propensity for conflict. If the transition to a new power structure is abrupt or uneven, or if leaders find it difficult to ascertain what exactly has come to pass, then the risk of conflict will increase.

During the cold war, nonaligned nations formed a bloc to forge better bargains with the dominant bipolar coalitions. Had the nonaligned movement

been more powerful or influential, it might have introduced significant additional confusion into cold war dynamics. As it was, nonaligned powers figured prominently only in regional or local disputes, not those involving the two superpowers.

More recently the United States has shown signs of being willing to bargain with European, South Asian, and other nations or centers of power in an attempt to balance the rise of China. Since these coalitions are inherently less tight than internal American attempts to balance challenges to its global leadership, they are bound to be more difficult to assess and handicap. Coalitions may disintegrate or form again with other members. This dynamism again increases the risk of errors, ambiguity, and conflict.

The tendency in recent years has been to see multilateral actions as superior to unilateral US efforts. This can certainly be the case for normative reasons, and because it may be cheaper for the United States to lead through consensus. However, multilateralism is not inherently better when viewed through the lens of uncertainty and conflict.

Some evidence exists, for instance, that Saddam Hussein discounted US threats before the first Gulf War in part because the coalition arrayed against him appeared too cumbersome to be effective.

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Likewise, the United Nations Security Council may offer false hope to the targets of sanctions or peacekeeping efforts in part because it is often unclear whether a fragile consensus on the Council can long be maintained.

World peace may be managed multilaterally, but most likely it will require a country to coordinate and lead, especially when the issues at stake are fractious and the price of action is high. The Bosnia conflict was an eye-opener for European powers in this regard. Even though a consensus existed that something needed doing, US involvement made action easier.

### AMERICA'S LEGACY

What will the United States be remembered for after its turn as hegemon is over? Previous hegemons are remembered most often for the languages and institutions they left behind—for the things that unite peoples, facilitate communication, and generate wealth.

The United States created the institutions that have made an increasing part of the world rich. These institutions, and the changes they have wrought in the world's capitals and industrial centers, have made the planet a much more prosperous and peaceful place. If American leadership wanes, but these institutions and norms remain, the world will indeed have a lasting legacy of US hegemony.

There are signs this can happen. But for a transition in the global power structure to be successful, the United States must be more farsighted and less preoccupied with minor distributional squabbles than is often the case. The temptation to fight for every last scrap of the fruits of global leadership must be avoided. If Americans are petty, they cannot expect rivals or successors to behave better.

Change almost certainly portends a loss of relative power for the United States. Affluence, too, will decline, if only in relative terms. But too many observers focus on relative decline, rather than ask what, in absolute terms, is the best option for the nation and for the world. America has had the opportunity to fashion a world system that is both successful and broadly beneficial. It would be best to think in terms of actions that help maintain that system, whether or not the United States is still in charge.

Too often, the tendency has been to equate US leadership with the US-inspired system. In previous epochs, this sort of assumption was natural, given that hegemons imposed parochial systems of governance on their worlds. Today, it is much less clear that changes in international leadership require a fundamental reordering of the global system of governance—any more than a change in the chairmanship of the European Union, say, means dramatic changes in the direction of that organization.

The emergence of multipolarity does not in itself invite the prospect of world instability and conflict. The connection between decline and violence is tenuous at best. Nor is there a good reason to believe that war would alter in any fundamental way America's relative decline. Shooting at another nation will not increase the appeal of US products or reduce the US debt. Nor will rising powers help their commercial enterprises through the use of force.

Given the fact that power depends on wealth in the modern world, nations are much better off if they can find ways to avoid disrupting markets and burdening budgets, especially when the most valuable assets are no longer readily conquerable. If war will not prevent the conditions that lead the United States to lose influence or that enable a challenger to rise, then war of any significant intensity is a futile act.

It should be obvious that everyone is better off managing the transition to a new system of international leadership much as the United States in its turn inherited hegemony. In the long run, promoting US interests really involves promoting the interests of other major powers in the existing international system. If the challengers see much to like in the existing system, the transition need not involve force, and succession can produce a new world order in which power is distributed differently but the rules remain largely the same.

Multipolarity could be an interim status for the world or a permanent order in which no nation is clearly the dominant power. In either case, the number of poles will prove much less problematic than the number of disagreements among nations about the world order, and who is in charge. We need not fear structure. We should fear uncertainty. ■