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Rising Powers and Revisionism in Emerging International Orders

Randall L. Schweller

International systems in transition are predictably defined by competition among established and emerging powers over whose preferred order will prevail. Latecomers, whose international prestige lags behind their newly augmented and still improving actual power, typically seek to extend their control and influence over more territory, other states, the world economy, and the set of rules and rights that govern interactions among states (e.g., international norms and regimes, the nature of diplomacy, and property rights on a global scale). This is the classic story of hegemonic war and international change.¹

Still, the emergence of rising powers does not always or inevitably trigger a struggle with the established powers over the fundamental nature of the existing order, even when we observe the two sides at war with each other. In World War I, for instance, the combatants were fighting over their relative positions in the world—positions defined in the conventional sense of boundaries, colonial possessions, and military and naval power. The war, though costly and destructive in its methods, was quite traditional in its aims. It was not a war about fundamental change; it was not fought over the social purpose of the international system, to redefine international norms and reshape governance structures. Rather its origins were dramatic shifts in power that opened a widening gap between actual and perceived power to the point where the newly powerful states no longer deemed the international order, defined in old-fashioned geopolitical terms, as legitimate.²

The fighting itself, however, with its unprecedented casualties and unlimited character ended up completely transforming the pre-war world in ways that none of the participants had anticipated. The United States became a world power. And the articulation by President Woodrow Wilson of American ideals embodied in collective security and the League of Nations radicalized the global security system, overturning the principles of normal balance-of-power politics and seducing much of the world to view Wilson and his revolutionary ideas as harbingers of a new world order. The war had also unleashed the Bolshevik revolution and the rise of Fascism, resulting in a world divided among three competing ideologies: liberal democracy, socialism, and fascism.

World War II was entirely different. A total reordering of the globe was intended from the very start, and the leadership on both sides recognized that this was at stake. It was a struggle not only for territory and resources but about who would survive and who would vanish entirely because they were believed inferior by the victors; about who would determine the structure of the internationalization of political authority—that is, the form (power) and content (social purpose) of international order and the regimes that serve these ends. If the Germans had succeeded in their quest to establish a “New Order” in Europe and then the world, Hjalmar Schacht’s design for international economic order rooted in 2 racialist doctrines and geopolitical strategies of imperialism would have been the mirror image of Bretton Woods.

Periods of crisis have been common in history; some have been resolved peacefully, others have not. It is likely that many factors explain why some shifts in power lead to bloody contests over global norms while others don’t. One important reason, I suspect, is how the established powers respond to

¹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

² See Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World At Arms: A Global History of WWII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1-5.

the demands of emerging powers. The crisis can only be resolved peacefully if and when there is recognition and general consent among the established powers of the irrevocable breakdown of the specific conditions that made the prior order possible. That is to say, whether a latecomer decides to challenge the order is not simply a matter of its innate character or identity. What the established countries agree to do or not to do also has a measurable effect on the decisions of latecomers to promote a disruptive agenda of change or support revisions within the established order.

Consider, for example, the global financial and monetary system. The July 2014 agreement by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa to establish a BRICS Development Bank and to also create a Contingent Reserve Fund among them demonstrates their level of frustration with the existing international financial institutions dominated by the Western powers. The BRICS are seriously underrepresented in these institutions even though they command 40% of the world's population, 20% of its economic output, and 17% of its trade. China, the world's second largest economy, has a 3.66 vote percentage in the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a lesser percentage than the Benelux countries. Nevertheless, a 2010 agreement to revise the voting allocations of the IMF has been stalled by Washington. Capitalizing on frustration with the United States' unwillingness to make international organizations more representative of developing countries, President Xi Jinping of China helped create a new development bank, operated by the BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—to challenge the primacy of the IMF and World Bank.³ This dance between established and rising powers has important consequences for global governance.

The current trend of “global power diffusion” has witnessed traditionally poor states experiencing historically unprecedented surges of upward mobility. Quite naturally, they seek greater representation and voice at international bargaining tables commensurate with their newfound power; they talk about making the international system more democratic, about the evils of one state dominating global affairs, and about the benefits of multipolarity. To date, however, the world has not seen any significant pushback by emerging non-Western powers. For reasons I discuss below, this is not as puzzling as it may seem at a glance.

Why Rising Powers May Not be Revisionist

Structural realist theories of international change invariably posit rising powers as spoilers, hell-bent on revising the international order. It is an assumption rooted in power-transition theory, the core logic behind “Hegemonic-War Cycle” notions of system change.⁴ In brief, the theory goes as follows.

³ Elizabeth C. Economy, “China’s Imperial President: Xi Jinping Tightens His Grip,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 6 (November/December 2014), p. 88.

⁴ Power transition theory is a dyadic theory about a rising state that is on the verge of overtaking a stronger but declining one. The more systemic versions of this theory are called Hegemonic-War Cycle Theory or Power Preponderance Theory. See A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Gilpin, *War and Change*. Another version is called “Long Cycle” theory. See, for instance, Charles F. Doran and Wes Parsons, “War and the Cycle of Relative Power,” *American Political Science Review* 74, No 4 (December 1980), pp. 947-965; and George Modelski, “The Long Cycle of Global Politics and the Nation-State,” *Comparative Studies in Security and History* 20 (April 1978), pp. 214-238. These theories share an important feature: they do not consider alliances in their analyses of power and international politics, which makes for some very strange historical interpretations. Most notably, “long cycle” histories typically ignore Russia prior to 1945. Given that the Russian army defeated both Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany, this is a rather remarkable oversight.

Given the law of uneven growth among states, a gap emerges over time between the actual distribution of power in the system and its distribution of prestige (or reputation for power), throwing the system into disequilibrium and causing persistent instability. To peacefully restore system equilibrium, the waning hegemon must cede influence to the rising challenger to the point where the latter's prestige matches its actual power.⁵ In theory, this process of appeasement should solve the problem without resort to war. In practice, it rarely works because: (1) satisfying a rising power's legitimate demands often means compromising the stability of the existing international order as well as the security and vital interests of the declining hegemon and its allies; (2) the rising power advances illegitimate grievances; (3) concessions increase the rising challenger's actual power, which encourages it to demand more concessions. For the declining hegemon, such a process of granting one concession after another to its rival and peer competitor may be seen as little more than death on the installment plan.

When bargaining fails to resolve the system crisis, hegemonic war breaks out because either: (1) the rising challenger perceives that its demands have not been met and, given its newfound relative power, the benefits of war now outweigh the costs or (2) the declining hegemon believes that war is inevitable and better fought now than later, so it initiates a preventive war against the rising challenger. Regardless of who initiates it, the war will be one of unlimited means and scope to decide who designs and controls the post-war order.

The main driver of the theory is the emergence of a rising challenger—one dissatisfied not only with its place in the established order but with the legitimacy of the order itself. The insatiable revisionism of the rising challenger triggers persistent crises that eventually ignite a hegemonic war. The logic behind this “spoiler” assumption, however, is quite murky and, frankly, somewhat illogical. By definition, rising powers are doing better than everyone else under the current order. It is not obvious, therefore, why they (of all states) would seek to spoil the established order; why they would choose an enormously costly global war of uncertain outcome to overthrow an order that has demonstrably worked for them, only to replace it with an untested one that they (and no one else) must pay the costs to start up and manage. What are they so dissatisfied about that they are willing to risk all the gains that they have made to this point and will make in the future? After all, prospect theory would lead us to expect that people tend to be risk averse when they are in the domain of gains, and they tend to be risk acceptant when in the domain of losses.⁶

Leaving the logic of prospect theory aside, the theory claims that an ever widening disjuncture between actual power and prestige causes rising powers to become increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo order. There are several problems with this logic.

First, prestige is a more serious issue under certain conditions as opposed to others. It matters most when powerful states have vital material conflicts of interests, disagreements over the rules of the game, and expectations that their differences will be settled by fighting. Such conflicts and expectations are largely absent today and do not appear fated to emerge in the future.

⁵ See Gilpin, *War and Change*.

⁶ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica*, Vol. 47, no. 2 (March 1979): 263-91; Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, eds., *Choices, Values and Frames* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Power-transition theory assumes that the rising power is risk-acceptant with respect to gains (contra prospect theory) or that the declining hegemon is risk-acceptant to avoid losses (consistent with prospect theory) or both.

Second, formal game theoretic analysis suggests that states making steady gains are inclined to postpone demands to be accorded a status commensurate with their power — that is, they are disposed to tolerate a real or perceived discrepancy between their international status (or prestige) and their national power. This tendency among emerging powers to delay status gratification will cease, however, when they sense that their growth is poised to die down or even to reverse. It is at this point that they will become more insistent on being fully compensated for their rising stature (e.g., with “a seat at the table,” or greater representation in existing institutions, or a clearly recognized and unchallenged sphere of influence). By implication, a rising China is a satisfied China, whereas a China that has stopped growing is a more demanding China.

Third, most rising powers are not complete powers but rather, in David Shambaugh’s phrase, “partial powers.” They simply do not have the full complement of power capabilities (both hard and soft power) needed to mount a serious global challenge to the existing hegemon. As transitioning countries, rising powers typically do not have a fixed identity — especially one with universal appeal. Thus, China’s reach, while undeniably global, is almost universally shallow: despite being a member of every major IGO, China neither seeks nor accepts leadership in any major international project; its foreign policy is truculent, reactionary, and driven almost exclusively by domestic politics; its non-resource-related economic activities abroad are very limited and have mostly foundered; its ‘*sui generis*’ culture is a mystery to outsiders and the Communist Party’s attempts to explain it to the world have been almost insurmountably inept; it has hard but no soft power, commands powerful awe but no deep admiration; has plentiful collaborators but no true friends. Indeed, China’s diplomatic relations everywhere in the world are mixed and currently deteriorating. This is not surprising. Becoming a global power means that bad — as well as good bad — things will happen to you, your image will not always be positive, and you will be criticized, so you must get used to it.⁷

Fourth, standard hegemonic transition theory expects all rising powers to demand prestige commensurate with their relative growth in capabilities. One of the core concepts of realist theory, prestige is defined as the reputation for power; it supplies international politics with its daily currency. When a disjuncture appears between this currency and the actual power distribution among states, the system is said to be in disequilibrium and is primed for hegemonic or system-wide war. This prediction, however, is reached through a faulty deductive logic—faulty because it ignores an important tradeoff: enhanced prestige is not free; its price is greater international responsibilities and obligations. If gains in prestige came without a price, as the theory wrongly assumes, then rising powers would have nothing to lose by demanding more of it. Because they know they will have to pay for greater prestige, they often do not ask for it. ⁵

Consider the last time hegemonic leadership changed hands. A declining Britain—one gravely imperiled by threats in Europe and elsewhere and too weak to both defend its interests and manage the international system—grudgingly decided that it was time to pass the baton of global leadership to the United States. The handoff was dropped, however, because the United was unwilling to pay the price of increased global responsibilities and obligations associated with an exalted position in the international pecking order. It took the attack by Japan at Pearl Harbor to bring the United States out of its isolationist shell. In the immediate post-war period (1945-52), the United States emerged as a

⁷ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

reluctant hegemon, grudgingly assuming leadership because it was the only victor able to construct a new global order. Even then, the United States dreamed of creating a third pole in Europe so it could return to the womb of the Western Hemisphere. It was not an appetite for prestige but rather the failure of this plan and the emergence of a powerful non-liberal enemy that finally drove America to manage its half of the international order.

Roughly the same problem exists today. The United States complains that China wants the privileges of power but not the responsibilities that top dogs are obligated to perform. To many Western observers, China appears as a shirker that must be coerced into taking appropriate actions when global crises arise. But the United States only assumed global responsibilities many years after it became the most powerful state on earth, when it produced almost half of the world's total economic output—a relative power position that China is not even close to achieving at this stage in its development. Why, then, should Washington or anyone else expect China, which produces roughly eight percent of the world's total economic output and is ranked 100th in the world in GDP per capita, to make substantial contributions to global governance?

Finally, most rising powers are driven more by their domestic politics than by their external ambitions. Indeed, taking a bird's eye view, the dynamics of emergent systems are themselves shaped by the primacy of domestic politics—that is, by dramatic political, social, and economic changes within powerful emerging and incumbent states that radiate outwards to the evolving international system. Why is this so?

A world in transition is a deeply uncertain one for both structural and motivational reasons. Emergent systems encounter unpredictable and often destabilizing power shifts among the system's most powerful actors. They also experience changing state motivations associated with relative power positions in flux.⁸ Regarding intentions, even if a reasonable amount of certainty could be achieved regarding the present intentions of the rising powers (in today's world, China, India, and Brazil) and those of the incumbents (the US, European Union, and Japan), there is no guarantee that current desires and preferences will remain stable over time. Just as we expect people who go from rags to riches or vice versa to change their personal ambitions, rising and declining powers can be expected to expand or contract their national goals as power reshuffles at the top of the international pecking order.

Both sources of uncertainty—structural uncertainty about the global distribution of capabilities and motivational uncertainty about the goals of rising and established major powers—spring from the taproot of domestic politics. With respect to structural uncertainty, the trajectory of a state's power crucially depends on the kinds of strategies its leaders embrace to mobilize resources (financial, productive, and human) for purposes of national security and economic growth. There is a long tradition within international relations (IR) scholarship of taking into account domestic as well as material factors in the specification of national power. Kenneth Waltz himself includes political stability and competence in his list of key capabilities that determine national rankings within the global hierarchy of power.⁹

⁸ Amrita Narlikar, "Introduction: Negotiating the Rise of New Powers," *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (May 2013), p. 567.

⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 131.

In terms of motivational uncertainty, variance in state preferences across time and space has long been attributed to domestic politics. Even the purest of systemic theories acknowledge a range of state goals and policies. Sometimes these divergences are explained by reference to system structure: states differently situated within the international system hold dissimilar aims and respond differently to comparable external incentives. Among similarly situated states, however, differences in states goals and responses to external cues are explained not by international structure but rather by domestic politics. Specifically, national political processes serve as “imperfect” transmission belts (intervening variables) that introduce deviations (residual variance) from the predictions of systemic theory regarding rational responses to external constraints and opportunities.¹⁰ Theories of domestic politics locate the determinants of foreign policy behavior and the national interest within the state itself. They are typically stories about how internal social and political pressures hold sway over the administrative and decision-making apparatuses of the state, causing a variety of state actions and goals that may or may not be responses to external stimuli. Variation in state goals is also a consequence of how elites frame national interests and demands in different ways for different audiences.¹¹

Domestic politics are particularly salient in a changing world. This is because the political environments that develop during global transitions are populated and defined by emerging powers, which, though expected to show competitive international faces, are more inward-looking, if not wholly distracted by domestic politics, than outwardly focused. After all, sudden and dramatic national growth induces massive social and political dislocations. As a nation grows, therefore, it becomes increasingly essential for its rulers, continuously mediating between their national societies and the international economy, to recalibrate periodically the balance between citizens, states, and markets as they simultaneously encourage stable and sustained growth.¹²

Revisionism: What Matters

Relations among incumbent and ascending powers can be uneasy and violent. According to power transition theory, the onset of war between a dominant and rising power grows more likely as the gap in relative strength between them narrows and as the latter’s grievances with the existing order — grievances that expand in lockstep with its mounting capabilities — move beyond any hope of peaceful resolution.¹³ From this perspective, eras of power transition present a heightened risk of conflict, as incumbents react to stave off relative decline in the face of confident challengers.

Economic and military convergence introduces a greater risk of conflict and disorder, as rising powers aim to place their imprint on reconstructed global institutions — and that stamp differs

¹⁰ Andrew Moravcsik, “Introduction: Integrating International and Domestic Theories of International Bargaining,” in Peter B. Evans, Harold K. Jacobson, and Robert D. Putnam, eds., *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 9.

¹¹ See, for instance, Shaun Breslin, “China and the Global Order: Signalling Threat or Friendship?” *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (May 2013), pp. 615-34.

¹² See Gregory Chin and Ramesh Thakur, “Will China Change the Rules of Global Order?” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (October 2010), pp. 119-138.

¹³ For a comprehensive review of power transition theory, see Jonathan M. DiCicco, and Jack S. Levy, “Power Shifts and Problem Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43, no. 6 (December 1999), pp. 675-704. For a critique of power transition theory, see Steve Chan, *China, the U.S., and the Power-Transition Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

markedly from the established order supported by the incumbent powers. The seemingly straightforward logic of this pessimistic view of convergence has a certain appeal, a seductive power rooted, perhaps, in primal myths about the son overtaking the father. Little wonder, then, that rising powers are usually portrayed in both theory and practice as “troublemakers,” promoting a disruptive agenda of change; as actors who “feel constrained, even cheated, by the status quo and struggle against it to take what they think is rightfully theirs.”¹⁴

Not all rising powers are dangerous revisionists, however, and revisionism is not always dangerous. Not every revisionist seeks to overthrow the existing order, to maximize its power, or to do so at the expense of others. Overlooking these nuances, the literature tends to discuss both rising powers and revisionist states in excessively general terms. Rising powers are deemed revisionists; and all states that seek any kind of change are termed ‘revisionist’ without further distinction, while incumbent, established powers are invariably labeled status quo.

I argue that there are four dimensions to revisionism that, taken together, determine whether the revisionist state poses a dangerous threat to the established powers and to what degree: (1) the extent of the revisionist state’s aims; (2) the revisionist state’s resolve and risk propensity to achieve its aims; (3) the nature of its revisionist aims (does it seek changes in international norms, or territory, or prestige); and (4) the means it employs to further its revisionist aims (whether peaceful or violent).

1. Extent of Revisionist Aims

At issue between emerging powers and established ones is the legitimacy of the existing international order — its division of territory, its institutional arrangements and governing structures, its norms and values. Here, legitimacy does not necessarily mean justice per se but rather an international consensus, especially among the great powers, about the nature of workable arrangements and the permissible aims and methods of foreign policy. Such a consensus about what is legitimate in international relations does not eliminate conflict but, instead, limits its scope and the acceptable means to resolve the problems that will inevitably arise among nations in a competitive, self-help system. In a legitimate order, even the most dissatisfied states desire only changes within the system, not a change of system; and adjustments of the status quo are acceptable as long as they are made within the framework of existing institutional arrangements and not at their expense.

There are basically two types of dissatisfied states: limited-aims revisionists and unlimited-aims revisionists or revolutionary powers. The goal of revolutionary states is not the adjustment of differences within a given system which will be at issue, but the system itself. It is a quest for global domination and ideological supremacy. While all revolutionary states are dissatisfied, not all dissatisfied states are revolutionary. The key question is whether the rising power views the protection and promotion of its essential values as dependent on fundamental changes in the existing international order; or whether it is merely dissatisfied with its prestige and portions of the status quo, e.g., its sphere of influence, certain international norms. If the former, then it is a revolutionary state that cannot be satisfied without destroying essential elements of the international order. If the latter, then its grievances can be satisfied, while preserving, and in some cases actually strengthening, the established order. These limited-aims revisionists are typically regional powers that seek either

¹⁴ Aaron L. Friedberg, “Hegemony With Chinese Characteristics,” *The National Interest*, no. 114 (July/August 2011), p. 18.

compensatory territorial adjustments to reflect their increased power, recognition as an equal among the great powers, or changes in the rules and decision-making procedures within, but not the basic norms and principles of existing regimes.

The key to the success of a strategy designed to cope with a rising, dissatisfied power is accurately distinguishing between these two types of revisionist states. Engagement, for instance, is an appropriate strategy with regard to limited-aims revisionist states. Satisfaction of their legitimate demands through reasonable concessions not only can be accomplished without sacrificing the existing order but, by converting these disgruntled states into defenders of the newly revised status quo, also strengthens the legitimacy and stability of the system and, thereby, helps to preserve the peace. Attempts to appease revolutionary states, by contrast, are not only misguided but dangerous: they weaken the appeaser's relative power position and whet the voracious appetite of the unlimited-aims adversary, whose individual grievances are part of a larger program of greedy expansion.

In Edmund Burke's eyes, for instance, the war against Revolutionary France was not a clash of interests but of ideologies, and so he saw no chance of reconciliation. Unlike the prior war against the American colonies, which Burke condemned, the present war was "not with an ordinary community, which is hostile or friendly as passion or interest may veer about: not with a State which makes war through wantonness, and abandons it through lassitude. We are at war with a system, which, by its essence, is inimical to all other Governments, and which makes peace or war, as peace and war may best contribute to their subversion. It is with an armed doctrine that we are at war."¹⁵ Likewise, in 1940, Hore-Belisha took the Burkean view that Nazism and British values could not coexist: "We did not enter the fight merely to reconstitute Czechoslovakia. Nor do we fight merely to reconstitute the Polish State. Our aims are not defined by geographical frontiers. We are concerned with frontiers of the human spirit. This is no war about a map."¹⁶

2. Resolve, Risk Propensity, and Time Horizons to Achieve Revisionist Aims

Dissatisfied states are distinguished not only by the extent of their revisionist aims but also by their risk propensity and resolve to make changes to the existing order. Risk propensity refers to the probability of success that a particular decision-maker requires before embarking on a course of action. In deciding whether to increase the nation's power through war or war-threatening conflict, for example, leaders of revisionist states make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, where the probability of success of a course of action is unknown. The sources of uncertainty of particular concern to a revisionist leader contemplating war include: (1) its own military strength relative to that of the target of the attack; (2) the balance of resolve, that is, how much the target values what is at stake compared with the value it attaches to what is at stake; (3) will other states get involved and, if

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, "Thoughts on the Prospect of a Regicide Peace, In a Series of Letters (1796)," in Works, Vol. 8 (London: J. Owen, 1815), p. 98. Burke also said: "It is, that this new system of robbery in France, cannot be rendered safe by any art; that it must be destroyed, or that it will destroy all Europe; that to destroy that enemy, by some means or other, the force opposed to it should be made to bear some analogy and resemblance to the force and spirit which that system exerts; that war ought to be made against it in its vulnerable parts. These are my inferences. In one word, with this Republick nothing independent can co-exist. The errors of Louis the XVIth were more pardonable to prudence, than any of those of the same kind into which the Allied Courts may fall. They have the benefit of his dreadful example." Edmund Burke, "Thoughts on the Prospect of a Regicide Peace, Letter 2: On the Genius and Character of the French Revolution as it Regards Other Nations," in Select Works of Edmund Burke. A New Imprint of the Payne Edition, Vol. 3, foreword and biographical note by Francis Canavan, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), p. 184.

¹⁶ Quoted in Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1963), p. 42.

so, who will align with whom; and (4) the relative capabilities of its own potential alliance partners and the likelihood that they will honor their alliance commitments when crunch time comes.

In terms of risk propensity, it is useful to distinguish between actors that are risk-acceptant and those that are risk-averse. Risk-acceptant actors are gamblers, while risk-averse actors are cautious under conditions of uncertainty. Risk-acceptant leaders, because they attach some added utility to the act of taking a gamble, are less constrained in making war decisions than are risk-averse actors; they are the actors most likely to saber-rattle, to ruthlessly engage in greedy expansion, and to anticipate bandwagon effects. Conversely, risk-averse actors are opportunistic in their attempts to improve their power positions. If and when an opportunity for expansion presents itself, they will take advantage of it. They do not force the issue, however.

Combining the two dimensions of “extent of revisionist aims” and “risk propensity,” we can make the following deductions. Risk-averse, limited-aims revisionists are opportunistic expanders that generally seek regional dominance. By contrast, risk-acceptant, limited-aims revisionists, aside from being more reckless in their strategies for gains, tend to have more ambitious aims than do their risk-averse counterparts; and, related to this, they often advance prestige demands as well as territorial ones. Moreover, risk-acceptant, limited-aims revisionists are typically more dissatisfied with the status-quo order than are their risk-averse counterparts; that is, they tend to place less value on their current possessions than do the latter, and so their strategic plans for change exhibit shorter time horizons than those of risk-averse, limited-aims revisionist states.

Risk-acceptant, revolutionary powers are the most virulent expanders. These are the states that have periodically emerged to mount a serious challenge to the very existence of the modern states system. In contrast, risk-averse, revolutionary powers—while they, too, desire a new order — are unwilling to risk system-wide war to overthrow the established order. Instead, they seek revolutionary change as a long-term, almost utopian, goal. Consequently, they are opportunistic and incremental in their attempts to revise the status quo; they operate with long-run time horizons.

3. Nature of Revisionist Aims: Norms, Regimes, Territory, and Prestige Demands

National growth tends to expand a state’s external activities and interests, whether for control over territory, the behavior of other states, the world economy, the rules and norms that govern international practices, raw materials, markets, living space, or to achieve religious converts, construct military and naval bases, or simply for purposes of exploration and adventure. Thus, periods of 10 international economic growth are associated with competition, sometimes intense, among countries for resources and markets, military power, political influence, and prestige.

Unlimited-aims revisionists are most likely to advance a full array of revisionist demands, calling for wholesale changes in norms, regimes, territory, and the hierarchy of prestige. This is why they are considered the T-Rex’s of international politics and change. By comparison, today’s emerging powers appear only modestly dissatisfied with the current international order. They seek only limited territorial changes and, for the most part, prefer peaceful to violent means to achieve their aims. And while they exhibit some displeasure with established global norms and regimes, the BICs (leaving Russia aside) mostly appear as conservative defenders of existing international security regimes,

confronting a post-9/11 unipolar power that has been intent on modifying those regimes unilaterally to accommodate a more expansive definition of its security interests.

In terms of the nature of revisionist aims, the key point is that some domains of revision are more dangerous than others. In other words, there is a qualitative difference between territorial revisionist aims and those pertaining to changes in norms or regimes. Dissatisfaction with the division of territory, borders, or spheres of influence has been shown to be a ‘most likely’ cause of interstate war. Unhappiness over the nature of global governance structures (norms and regimes), by contrast, is far less likely than territorial disputes to lead to large-scale violence or the need to resort to the battlefield for their resolution. Emerging powers can circumvent most established international rules and norms without resorting to or provoking the use of military force. War is unlikely to break out because China does not condition its foreign aid on human rights practices within the host country, violating the established norm of tying human rights to foreign aid. Like norm violations, prestige demands need not result in war; they can often be satisfied by providing the emerging power with a seat at the table.

Along these lines, consider international regimes as a domain of potential revisionist claims. Some have suggested, for instance, that emerging powers prefer alternative models of political and economic organization (the Beijing Consensus, for instance) that deploy “purposive state intervention to guide market development and national corporate growth, rather than relying on self-regulated market growth.”¹⁷ Because such alternatives represent clear challenges to the market-oriented prescriptions of the so-called Washington Consensus, if large emerging economies seek to export and create a compatible global environment for their competing ‘neo-mercantilist’ economic development models, it is possible that conflict with the incumbent powers and their existing global economic institutions might ensue. To date, the revealed preferences of the BRICs toward global economic governance have yet to indicate that they are promoting such an ambitious and ideological agenda.¹⁸ And even if conflict eventually arises between emerging and incumbent powers over global economic governance, it is unlikely to turn violent.

While they may potentially exert significant effects on the quality of international order, disputes over global governance issues (ideational as opposed to material quarrels) are highly susceptible to either negotiated settlements or, failing that, to other peaceful strategies of conflict resolution. Emerging powers can, for instance, simply selectively engage with the established powers and their preferred order. Regarding the latter strategy, emerging powers may prefer to remain only partly plugged into the established global architecture, picking and choosing which of the existing rules of the game in global economic governance they choose to comply with.

A more radical option exists as well, one that seems an evolutionary consequence of this “selective engagement” strategy: large emerging powers could create their own separate economic governance institutions, that is, an alternative global economic system that is exterior to, but somewhat overlapping with, the established global economic architecture. Along these lines, China has been

¹⁷ Gregory Chin and Ramesh Thakur, “Will China Change the Rules of Global Order?” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (October 2010), pp. 119–38 at p. 123.

¹⁸ Miles Kahler, “Rising Powers and Global Governance: Negotiating Change in a Resilient Status Quo,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (May 2013), pp. 711–729 at p. 713.

pitching an idea to its neighbors in Asia: a big, internationally funded bank that would offer quick financing for badly needed transportation, telecommunications, and energy projects in underdeveloped countries across the region—a new bank that is widely seen as undermining existing institutions. Called the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, it is China’s answer to the World Bank and Asian Development Bank—international institutions established after WWII that are dominated by the United States and Japan. The proposed bank would not require the environmental standards, procurement requirements, protections intended to prevent the forced removal of vulnerable populations from their lands (e.g., construction of dams that displace people from their homes), and other safeguards adopted by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. In Washington’s view, the bank is merely “a political tool for China to pull countries in Southeast Asia closer to its orbit, a soft-power play that promises economic benefits while polishing its image among neighbors anxious about its territorial claims.”¹⁹ But these arguments have run up against the fact that existing institutions have failed to meet the region’s undisputed needs. The World Bank and ADB have reason to be anxious because Beijing has already pledged \$50 billion in initial capital and has told prospective members that it expects another \$50 billion from financial institutions and private capital. The ADB, by comparison, has only \$78 billion in capital.

4. Means of Revision: Peaceful or Violent Change

When we say that a state is a revisionist or status quo power, we are referring to its goals and not its intentions—the actions a state plans to take under certain circumstances. As Sebastian Rosato puts it:

A status quo power may have peaceful intentions; that is, it may plan to keep things as they are without threatening or using force. But it may equally have aggressive intentions, believing that it must destroy its peers to maintain the current situation. Thus the same goal—preserving the status quo—can generate different plans of action. The argument also applies to revisionists. A revisionist power may have aggressive intentions; that is, it may plan to overturn the existing order by force. Or it may have peaceful intentions, simply choosing to sit tight and wait for its more powerful rivals to decline. Again, the same goal can be associated with different intentions.²⁰

Thus, what matters most about rising powers, whatever their preferences regarding territorial revisions or the content and form of global governance, is the means by which they plan to press their grievances. Do they choose peaceful or violent methods? Even the most outspoken reformers can display “a more assertive policy pursued through engagement and negotiation: pressing for reform but operating very much within the system.”²¹ Such peaceful appeals for reform within the established order should be seriously addressed, if not wholeheartedly supported, by the incumbent powers, or else they risk creating precisely the variety of rising challengers they fear most: violent risk-acceptant aggressors. As E. H. Carr acutely observed many decades ago:

¹⁹ Jane Perlez, “U.S. Opposing China’s Answer to World Bank,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2014, pp. A1, A8 at p. A8.

²⁰ Sebastian Rosato, “The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Winter 2014/2015), p. 59.

²¹ A description of Brazil’s stance towards the existing order by Andrew Hurrell, “Brazil: What Kind of Rising State in What Kind of Institutional Order?” in Alan S. Alexandroff and Andrew F. Cooper, eds, *Rising States, Rising Institutions* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2010), pp. 128–50 at p. 136.

[T]he defense of the status quo is not a policy which can be lastingly successful. It will end in war as surely as rigid conservatism will end in revolution. ‘Resistance to aggression’, however necessary as a momentary device of national policy, is no solution; for readiness to fight to prevent change is just as unmoral as readiness to fight to enforce it. To establish methods of peaceful change is therefore the fundamental problem of international morality and of international politics.²²

Aside from avoiding war, there are good economic reasons for the incumbents to seek peaceful change; if not on a common feeling of what is just and reasonable, as an adjustment to the contemporary world’s altered relations of power. Successfully negotiating the rise of the BRICS and other rapidly developing economies will have significant positive global externalities that will benefit the incumbent powers and their citizens as well. Dramatic downturns in the largest emerging economies serve no one’s interests. As Miles Kahler opines, “A return to the poor and poorly governed China of the recent past, to the India of persistent poverty and low growth rates, to the Brazil of hyperinflation and recurrent financial crises would be the worst outcome for the international order.”²³ Both established and emerging powers and their publics need to recognize that their long-run economic interests, broadly conceived, are more shared than opposed.

The United States as the True Revisionist Power

In conclusion, I want to argue that it is hegemons — both newly crowned and rising hegemons (a type of state that, to my knowledge, has not been discussed at all in the literature) — that are best positioned and most motivated to be revisionist powers. This claim is implicit in standard structural-realist understandings of international change. According to Robert Gilpin’s theory and G. John Ikenberry’s amendment to it, hegemonic wars end with the emergence of an overwhelmingly dominant power that is both able and willing to transform the system.²⁴ In other words, the newly crowned hegemon is expected to revise the system (be a revisionist state), constructing its own vision of order upon an international landscape wiped clean of its prior institutions.

Unlike past hegemonic wars, the Cold War was not an actual shooting war, and so its end did not result in a world in tatters — in a tabula rasa on which the newly crowned hegemon can build its own norms and supporting global architecture. Nevertheless, the US was in ascent during the first two decades after the Cold War. Ascending powers, especially unipolar ones, are most able and willing to revise the status quo to their liking. And this is precisely what the US did. In Kenneth Waltz’s words, “The winner of the Cold War and the sole remaining great power has behaved as unchecked powers have usually done. In the absence of counterweights, a country’s internal impulses prevail, whether fueled by liberal or by other urges.”²⁵ Indeed, one cannot imagine a more perfect engine to drive large-scale international revision than the unchecked internal impulses of a lone superpower within a unipolar system.

²² Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper & Row, [1939], 1964), p. 222.

²³ Kahler, “Rising Powers and Global Governance,” p. 729.

²⁴ Gilpin, *War and Change*; Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

²⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000), p. 24.

The Bush doctrine, for instance, had four central components, three of which challenged core principles of Westphalian order.²⁶ The first pillar was rooted in the belief that America's values—"freedom, democracy, and free enterprise"—are universal and their spread will benefit the entire world. America's task, therefore, is to aggressively spread, sometimes by means of unilateral military interventions, its values; "to restructure the world toward freedom" and, thereby, rid the world of evil.²⁷ The notion of spreading democracy and promoting human rights by means of military intervention violates Westphalian sovereignty—that nations have the right to govern themselves and to determine their own destiny.²⁸ Even the United Nations—an advocate for human rights—recognizes state sovereignty, which suggests limits on other states' abilities to protect human rights outside their borders.

The second element of the Bush Doctrine undermined longstanding norms on military preemption and against preventive war. Because we live in extraordinarily dangerous times, and because deterrence does not work against terrorists and rogue states, since they do not value anything that can be held at risk and are especially risk-acceptant and accident prone, the U.S. must embrace preventive war and be willing to act against "emerging threats before they are fully formed."²⁹ According to Steven Hook and John Spanier, "the Bush Doctrine challenged a central tenet of international law that required nation states to identify an imminent danger before they could legitimately resort to military force." In their view, "the scope of the new grand strategy [the 'Bush Doctrine'] was unprecedented in world history."³⁰ Likewise, Ian Hurd argues that the new US interpretation of military preemption, as stated in the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS), explicitly challenges how the concept has been traditionally understood in international law and is incompatible with how many countries understand existing norms governing international intervention for self-defense.³¹

Finally, the Bush doctrine claimed that there are no universal norms or rules governing all states — meaning that the U.S. is not subject to international law or the rules and norms that apply to everyone else. As the world's dominant state, the U.S. does not play by any rules, even its own. Managing the world, keeping it stable, and making it more free require the US to behave differently from everyone else. Just as the police can break the laws (e.g., run red lights, shoot people, damage private property) to catch the "bad guys" who transgress the law (or are believed to be such people), the US can and must act in ways that others cannot and must not: this serves not only the national interest of the United States but those of all law-abiding states (stakeholders in the global order)—or so the argument goes.

To be sure, the United States thinks of itself as acting for the sake of peace, justice, and well-being in the world; and by virtually any measure, the American system has been an unqualified success,

²⁶ The four components of the Bush doctrine are outlined by Robert Jervis in "Understanding the Bush Doctrine" in Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005), ch. 4.

²⁷ Bush quote in *ibid.* p. 82.

²⁸ "Westphalian sovereignty ... refers to the autonomy of domestic authority structures—that is, the absence of authoritative external influences." Stephen D. Krasner, "Problematic Sovereignty," in Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *Problematic Sovereignty: Contested Rules and Political Responsibilities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 2.

²⁹ Bush quoted in Jervis, *American Foreign Policy*, p. 84.

³⁰ Steven W. Hook and John Spanier, *American Foreign Policy since World War II*, 16th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2004), pp. 350-51.

³¹ Ian Hurd, "Breaking and Making Norms: American Revisionism and Crises of Legitimacy," *International Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2-3 (March-May 2007), pp. 194-213

generating unparalleled global prosperity.³² But imagine another globally dominant power, say China or Russia, acted on its beliefs that: (1) its mission is to rid the world of evil by spreading what it claims are its universal values; (2) its security requires waging preventive wars; and (3) international norms, rules, and law apply to everyone else but not to itself because world order requires that it acts differently from all other states. Would we not consider that to be a revisionist power?

About the author:

Randall Schweller, Professor of political science at The Ohio State University.

³² Between 1950 and 2000, annual GDP growth for the entire world was 3.9% (with growth rates in Asia matching or exceeding those in Europe and the United States), as compared with 1.6% between 1820 and 1950. World trade more than tripled between 1980 and 2002. Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), pp. 40-41.