

Change in International Politics: An Introduction to the Contemporary Debate

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Among the deficiencies demonstrated by the world financial crisis of 2008–9, one was the limited capacity of G-8 to provide for global economic governance. The developed economies quickly realised that they should seek joint solutions and coordinated policies in cooperation with the leading emerging-market economies. As a result, the G-20 turned into the main forum for managing the crisis. This in fact pointed to an early institutional acknowledgement that important changes were underway in the global distribution of power. These changes derive from the substantially higher growth rates of the emerging-market economies in comparison with those of the developed economies, a trend named ‘the rise of the rest’ (Zakaria, 2008, pp. 2–3).

The differential impact of the financial crisis on the world’s largest economies accelerated the pace of these changes, prompting market analysts and financial services companies to radically revise their projections about global economic trends. While some disagreement persists concerning the speed of transformation (see for instance Ward, 2011; Standard Chartered Bank, 2010; O’Neill and Stupnytska, 2009), all analyses converge on the forecast that in the coming years, the leading emerging-market economies will overtake the largest G-8 economies. Whether or not it happens as early as 2020 (Standard Chartered, 2010, p. 21) or a few years later, in 2027–9 (O’Neill and Stupnytska, 2009, pp. 22–3), China will surpass the US and become the world’s largest economy, India will emerge in Japan’s place as the third-largest economy and Brazil will outpace Germany as the fifth-largest. In light of these projections, an interesting debate is going on among analysts of international politics about the future of the international system. Much of it revolves around three closely interrelated questions: (a) the evolving role of the US and the prospects of

its global pre-eminence, (b) the nature of Sino–American relations and (c) the chances for the consolidation of multilateralism and cooperation among the leading powers.

With respect to the first question, several commentators have expressed concern about the prospective relative diminution of US power. Gideon Rachman (2011) remarks that the US ‘will never again experience the global dominance’ it enjoyed between the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of the financial crisis, asserting that ‘[t]hose days are over’. Roger Cohen (2009) concurs that ‘Pax Americana’ is approaching the end of its life. And Thomas Wright (2010) notes that the era of expansion of the US-led ‘open, democratic international order’ is coming to an end.

At the same time, some analysts advise restraint in predicting the rapid demise of US power (Ferguson, 2009, p. 123). According to Paul Kennedy, ‘[g]reat empires, or hegemonies, or number-one powers (whichever term one prefers) rarely if ever crash in some swift, spectacular way. Rather, they slide slowly downhill, trying to avoid collisions, dodging rising obstacles, making an offering here and there, ever searching for a flatter, calmer landscape’ (2010, pp. 15–16). Two other scholars agree that it is premature ‘to write America’s great-power obituary’ and point to the US’s unrivalled military capabilities (Kaplan and Kaplan, 2011, p. 42). Indeed, the US defence budget remains around 10 times higher than the second-largest defence budget (China’s) in the world (IISS, 2011, p. 33). Moreover, Joseph Nye (2010, p. 12) argues that if the US adopts ‘a smart strategy’ that combines hard- and soft-power resources and builds on alliances and networks, it will remain for some time the most powerful state in the world. Interestingly, another analyst claims that the position of the US will actually be strengthened once the age of its unipolarity is over. This is because it will then avoid the danger of overextension as well as all the frequent distractions that inhibit the advancement of its narrow interests. Washington will also no longer pay the disproportionate cost of sustaining the international status quo, and many sources of anti-Americanism will disappear. As for US allies, the same analyst argues that they will become even more reliable out of fear of the emergence of Russia and China (Maher, 2011, pp. 59–64).

A second thread of the debate builds on the argument that the emerging international system will be bipolar and focuses on Sino–American relations. Analysts are split in their forecasts on the probability that China will develop revisionist and hegemonic aspirations. On the one hand, several

experts warn that China will become more assertive with the growth of its power. Dyer, Pilling and Sender (2011) claim that China is increasingly attempting to 'mould' the rules and institutions that are essential for the function of the world economy with the aim of forging 'post-American globalisation'. Another commentator concurs that two concepts of world order are in collision, and the US has a choice to make: 'resist Chinese ambitions and risk a trade war in which everyone loses; or do nothing and let China remake the trading system. The first would be dangerous; the second, potentially disastrous' (Samuelson, 2010). John Mearsheimer takes this line of argument a step further and suggests that if China's economic growth persists over time, Beijing will drastically increase its military capabilities in order to rise as a regional hegemon in Asia. This is a development that the US will not allow to happen (Mearsheimer, 2011, p. 33). Overall, what all these analyses share in common is a bleak prediction of the evolution of US–China relations. Unsurprisingly, Washington is encouraged to adopt some version of policy of containment.

However, others believe that China's ascendance does not need to lead to deteriorating relations between the world's two largest powers. They advocate the advancement of Sino–American cooperation, suggesting a G-2 type of arrangement whereby the two powers share responsibility for the preservation of world order. Henry Kissinger (2009) argues that the US–China relationship 'needs to be taken to a new level'. He points out that the two powers should strengthen their political ties by developing 'a sense of common purpose'. Handel Jones advances a similar argument, claiming that Washington and Beijing should develop 'ChinAmerica', denoting a mutually beneficial partnership for the equitable sharing of wealth without inflicting damage on each other's interests (Jones, 2010, p. 8). And Thomas Christensen (2011) suggests that Washington should encourage Beijing to assume a greater role in the collective effort of dealing with global challenges such as the nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea.

Many analysts stand somewhere between the two opposing poles of the debate on China (that is, containment vs. engagement). For instance, Zakaria predicts that Beijing will probably remain an asymmetric superpower that may attempt to peacefully enlarge its (largely economic) sphere of influence without, however, challenging the US's military pre-eminence. In Zakaria's assessment, the US is unprepared for such a scenario because it has had experience only with traditional political-military challengers such as Nazi Germany and the USSR (2008, pp. 126–8).

The third strand of the debate concerns the hypothesis that the emerging international system will be multipolar in nature.¹ According to Barry Buzan (2011), superpowers are ‘dying out’ and being replaced by great powers with regional reach in an emerging ‘regionalized world order’. Buzan asserts that the main feature of this system will be ‘a relatively even distribution of power worldwide and a densely integrated and interdependent global system and society. This might be labelled *decentred globalism* to contrast it with the centred globalism captured in the many core–periphery characterizations of the modern world order’ (p. 21).

There has also been some debate about the fate of multilateralism as well as on predictions about the course of relations among G-20 members (mainly between the seven developed economies, on the one hand, and the remaining thirteen powers, on the other). One commentator notes the world’s division between ‘a worried, depressed and disoriented West’ on the one hand, and a ‘buoyant, questing and increasingly confident emergent world of nations’ on the other. While the West experiences a ‘new Age of Anxiety’, several emerging-market countries are undergoing a ‘new Age of Possibility’ (Cohen, 2010). Two other scholars anticipate that the developed world will observe a diminution of the influence of its ideas and of its capacity to shape the content of the global development agenda (Birdsall and Fukuyama, 2011, p. 53). And Richard Rosecrance claims that it will be futile for the US to resist the rise of new powers. What it should do instead is establish a ‘transatlantic economic union’ with Europe that will ‘draw surging protocapitalist states into its web’ (Rosecrance, 2010, p. 49).

Part of the discussion also concerns the role that the G-20 might play in the future.² Geoffrey Garrett (2010) asserts that a more institutionalised G-20 might nest the G-2 within its ranks and assist the diffusion of US–China tensions. However, other analysts do not vest so much hope in multilateralism. They remark that international cooperation over the most important global issues has stalled and the G-20 countries have failed to translate words into deeds (Samans, Schwab and Malloch-Brown, 2011). Bremmer and Roubini (2011) claim that what we see is neither a G-20 nor

¹ According to Alasdair Young (2010, p. 3), different depictions of the system’s polarity reflect a different degree of emphasis with respect to power (its aggregate content vs. some selected dimensions) on the one hand, and the referent object of analysis (the US vs. ‘middle-ranked great powers’) on the other.

² See for instance the exchange between Shorr and Wright (2010).

a G-2 world. Rather, we are witnessing the emergence of a ‘cacophony of competing voices’, a ‘G-Zero world’ in which no single great power or coalition of powers has the leverage or the will to advance the international agenda. As a result, competition will drive the negotiations among the world’s leading powers on economic and trade issues during the following decades (Bremmer and Roubini, 2011).

This brief presentation of some aspects of the debate concerning upcoming transformations in the international system demonstrates a plurality of assessments, predictions and policy prescriptions. It is indeed very difficult to discern in advance the direction and the content of meaningful international changes. The realm of world affairs is so complex that ‘to dare to understand’ it (not to mention make forecasts about it) has been depicted as ‘sheer craziness’ (Rosenau and Durfee, 2000, p. 1). As Kissinger (2009) observes, ‘[n]ever have so many transformations occurred at the same time in so many different parts of the world and been made globally accessible via instantaneous communication’. There are far too many developments taking place across multiple sectors and different levels of analysis, and the detection and singling out of whatever might matter in the long term is simply impossible.

Different prognoses about international changes largely reflect and reproduce the divergent presumptions emanating from contending theoretical traditions of international relations. Political realists such as Kenneth Waltz (1979) and Robert Gilpin (1981) link international transformation with changes in the capabilities of states. Gilpin suggests in his seminal work, *War and Change in World Politics*, that ‘the most important factor for the process of international political change . . . is the differential or uneven growth of power among states’ (1981, p. 93). A transformation of the distribution of power may alter the cost-benefit calculus of states regarding their chances of changing (usually through a hegemonic war) the international political order. In this regard, the international system moves cyclically from a condition of equilibrium to one of disequilibrium and again (after the end of the hegemonic war) to a new equilibrium. Presumably, the realist tradition generates most of the predictions that competition will be the main feature of the emerging international system. Interestingly, it is from the same tradition, and out of serious concern for the repercussions that a Sino–American competition might have, that Kissinger’s preference for a G-2 arrangement also emanates.

For liberals, to give another example, the drivers of international change are norms, institutions and ideas. For instance, James Rosenau, among other influential advocates of liberal theory, considers the world order to be sustained by three levels of activity: (a) the ideational level, referring to the people's perceptions, beliefs and shared values concerning the content of global arrangements; (b) the behavioural level, implying what people routinely and unconsciously do to maintain global arrangements and (c) the political level, consisting of the institutions and regimes materialising the policies that are implied at the ideational and behavioural levels (Rosenau, 2000, p. 14). While Rosenau does not deny the importance of changes in material conditions as drivers of international transformation, he notices that the above three levels of activity are related interactively, feeding on each other to maintain order (pp. 19–21). The ideational, behavioural and political patterns of international order generate habits (meaning 'standardized, routinized, and repetitive ways of responding to events') that are not easily or readily replaced (p. 24). According to Rosenau, whilst a change in the global distribution of power can render the arrangements of the contemporary international order useless, the emergence of a new order that will be rooted in consensus and new 'habits' might be a slow-ripening process (p. 24). Therefore, within the liberal tradition fall some of the prescriptive (rather than predictive) analyses that view the G-20 or a 'transatlantic economic union' (or any other multi-lateral framework) as the adequate institution that will provide for the accommodation of the great powers' interests and the shaping of the new international order.

Even if we assume that we can accurately predict how great powers will react to upcoming changes, we will never be entirely certain of the repercussions of their policies. As one scholar explains, '[s]tates do tend to throw dice, however, with little capacity to predict how the throw will turn out: to expedite primacy or stall decline, to achieve affluence or escape austerity, compel regime change or resist it, win a war without ending it or end it before winning it, and more, much more' (Serfaty, 2011, p. 19). Moreover, irrespectively of how one reads global trends, they are not the sole 'markers' of international transformation. According to Kalevi Holsti, there are two more identifiers of international change. One type is 'great events', that is to say, sharp breaks in history causing the interruption of typical patterns (Holsti, 2004, pp. 10–11). The outbreak of the First and Second World Wars, the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks of

9/11 qualify as such 'great events'. The other type of marker is 'significant social/technological innovations'. This is a specific category of great events signalling progress in material conditions (for instance, the invention of the atomic bomb and the revolution in information and communications technology) (pp. 11–12). The problem with both of these types of markers is that we usually do not apprehend them until the moment that they are actually taking place. For example, it was beyond anyone's imagination that the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, in protest over the confiscation of his wares could trigger in early 2011 a wave of anti-regime protests across North Africa and the Middle East that within days would force Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt to step down and would cause the outbreak of war in Libya. Thus, beyond the study of trends, our early prediction capacity is rather limited.

The aim of this book is not to renounce or discredit any effort at comprehending change in international politics. It is indeed a human need to quest for early predictions of upcoming transformations in order to reduce uncertainty and prepare adequately for the future. The book, however, underscores the complexity of the entire enterprise of forecasting international politics and proceeds cautiously to investigate the questions of change and continuity concerning a large array of actors, with respect to a series of issues and across three major levels of analysis. At the systemic level, this volume debates the questions of order, anarchy, power and security. At the unit level, it focuses on the priorities, policies and relations among the world's largest powers. And at the individual level, it discusses the beliefs and preferences of the current leaderships in the two leading global powers, the US and China.

This collection of essays does not attempt to articulate a cohesive alternative perspective of how the world will look in the near future. Its pieces do not form perfectly complementary parts of a uniform image of the international system. In some respects, the book serves as a forum for debate and for the presentation of often divergent accounts of core dimensions of contemporary international politics. In this regard, what is offered is a series of snapshots of different aspects, and from varying angles, of an international system in motion. Snapshots are by definition static reflections of a fluid reality, and accordingly, comprehension of the international system's evolution requires continuous analysis and assessment.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the established global players – the US, the EU and Japan – and their role in the new world configuration of power. The second part of the book discusses the role of the emerging great powers – the so-called BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China)³ – and assesses the prospect of their participation in the global order. Finally, the third part deals with the main features of the international system and provides accounts of some of the pressing issues of high politics on the world agenda, debating core dimensions of intractable problems such as ethnic conflicts, international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The first chapter assesses the influence of the US in the contemporary international system. Dimitris Keridis argues that American world pre-eminence will not be challenged in the foreseeable future. In terms of capabilities, the US will persist as the indispensable nation. This is not to claim that Washington will be able to resolve international problems unilaterally, nor should the use of military force be the remedy for all situations. Keridis instead asserts that Washington will keep playing a leading role in all successful collective efforts towards the management of international challenges.

In the second chapter, Alexander Moens examines the changes that have been introduced in American foreign policy under the Obama Administration. The author elaborates on the President's preference for diplomacy, soft power and multilateralism. Obama has registered some successes with this approach, most notably the improvement of relations with traditional allies and the signing of the New START agreement with Russia. However, Moens claims that Obama's foreign policy lacks a strategic vision of American security interests and underestimates the continuing relevance of hard power. Hence, Obama's diplomatic approach might be misinterpreted by rival powers such as China and Russia as signalling weakness.

Stephen Szabo analyses in the third chapter the impact of the global shift of power on the transatlantic community. The author notes that the rise of the BRICs diminishes Western influence in the world and challenges the post-Second World War global institutional arrangements. However, the emerging powers have greater differences among themselves than they do common interests. Hence, Szabo contends that the Americans

³ The group was enlarged (and renamed BRICS) with the admission of South Africa at the end of 2010.

and the Europeans may set aside their own recent divergences and draw on their common values and similar threat perceptions to establish the core of a new global order which some of the BRICs might decide to join.

The next two chapters focus on the efforts of the European Union (EU) to assume greater responsibilities in the international system. Whether it acts collectively on the basis of common policies and joint actions or is only indirectly present through the coordinated policies of some of its member states, the EU struggles to participate in the management of a broad range of global challenges.

Kostas Ifantis and Ioannis Galariotis explicate the foundations of European power and analyse the EU's approach towards its major partners and the most pressing international questions. The authors remark that by virtue of its 'civilian' power as well as the aggregate material capabilities of its member states, the EU should be considered the second superpower, far ahead of emerging contenders such as China and India. However in Europe's case, capabilities alone do not suffice for the performance of a global role. The EU needs to act internationally as a global power. It should articulate its own strategic vision of the world and attempt to advance it through an elaborate grand strategy.

In the fifth chapter, Rafał Trzaskowski, Olaf Osica and Joanna Popielewska discuss the institutional efforts of the EU to streamline its Common Foreign and Security Policy. The authors present the reforms that were introduced with the Treaty of Lisbon, focusing on the provision for the establishment of a European External Action Service (EEAS). The chapter offers a detailed account of the institutional negotiations and procedures for the operationalisation of the EEAS and concludes that the success of this reform will largely depend on the political will of the EU member states to forge a genuinely common EU foreign policy.

Malcolm Cook unfolds the multiple changes that are taking place simultaneously in Japan's domestic and international environments. He explains how Japan is struggling to cope with a lengthy period of economic decline and the deterioration of its relative power position against China. Cook underscores the sharp diminution of the country's foreign aid budget, the strengthening of its alliance with the US, the conclusion of bilateral security treaties with India and Australia and the adoption of a more assertive policy as an international security provider. Overall, the author concludes that Japan is currently undergoing the early stages of an uncertain epochal change.

In the next chapter, Robert Sutter assesses the prospects of China's assuming a leading role in world affairs. Notwithstanding its impressive growth rates and its significantly improved military capabilities, the author claims that China's international leadership will remain limited and encumbered in the foreseeable future. Beijing has on several occasions demonstrated that it is not eager to undertake costs, risks and commitments for causes not directly linked to its narrowly defined national interests. Moreover, the US will remain the leading power in Asia, benefiting from the development of good relations with all major regional powers that are concerned with China's rise.

From a political psychology perspective, Huiyun Feng and Kai He study the personal traits of contemporary Chinese leadership. The two authors employ (and update) Alexander George's framework of operational code analysis to examine the belief systems of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. Feng and He demonstrate that the two Chinese leaders have similar beliefs about politics, both of them supporting tolerance, moderation and cooperation. However, Hu and Wen both perceive that they have a weak grasp over historical developments. The chapter concludes with the observation that the outcome of the struggle between moderate and conservative factions within the Communist Party will determine China's political future.

The chapter by Efstathios Fakiolas elaborates on Russia's resurgence as a great power. The author observes a continuity of strategic aims and policies between the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev. Fakiolas unfolds the basic elements of Russia's grand strategy encompassing the stimulation of exports of energy resources and weapons, domestic reforms aimed at restoring some of the state's control over the economy, and the country's integration into the world economy. According to Fakiolas, the resurgent Russia will not evolve again into a hostile actor towards the West but instead will strive to consolidate its recovery by carefully advancing its interests and preferences.

Harsh Pant analyses India's trajectory towards the acquisition of a global power status. The chapter acknowledges the impressive growth of India's economic power. It also remarks on the progress in India-US relations, culminating in Obama's support of India's bid for a permanent seat in a reformed UN Security Council. However, Sino-Indian frictions have not abated and New Delhi observes Beijing's military build-up with anxiety. Above all, India is increasingly marginalised within its own neighbourhood as a result of China's successful openings towards Paki-

stan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. If India cannot restore its influence in South Asia, it will certainly have difficulty in advancing its global aspirations.

Pedro Seabra's contribution explores Brazil's attempt to wield greater clout in international politics. The author elaborates on Brazil's ambition to participate in the reform of the post-Second World War international order and upgrade its status in international institutions. Brazil has actively taken part in various multinational fora and has gained much visibility for its positions on different questions ranging from climate change and economic governance to Iran's nuclear programme. Notwithstanding the fact that it has invested much on groupings of emerging powers – specifically, BRIC and IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) – Brazil has also maintained a pragmatic approach towards the US and Europe, Seabra suggests.

Harry Papasotiriou offers a perspective, informed in part by the Realist tradition and in part by the English School of international relations, of the main features of the contemporary international system. The author highlights the central role of the great powers and of the operation of the balance of power mechanism among them for the maintenance of international order. In light of this, Papasotiriou explicates the US decision to go to war against Iraq by recalling the tendency of the great powers to promote their domestic values internationally. However, he warns that the violent imposition of liberalism could have adverse effects, stimulating the formation of anti-hegemonic coalitions among the world's most authoritarian regimes.

Dimitris Chrysoschoou and Dimitris Xenakis unfold a different perspective on questions of order and anarchy in the international system. In contrast with what Papasotiriou asserts in the previous chapter, these two authors observe a complex and pluralistic world in motion that is characterised by the synthesis of anarchy and synarchy as well as of order and disorder. Rule-based international governance and several other processes that operate at the global level alter (but do not obliterate) the contours of state sovereignty and provide for the symbiosis of a variety of actors in an emerging organised plurality.

In the next chapter, Irini Chila reflects on the outbreak and protraction of the large number of ethnic conflicts around the world. The author elaborates on the causes of these conflicts and highlights the complex interplay of a variety of factors, such as historical enmities, ethnic differences and grievances, territorial claims, weak state structures and intrastate security

dilemmas fuelling collective fears. The great powers have placed much hope for the pacification and stabilisation of war-shattered states on the implementation of democratic reforms. Chila demonstrates, however, that the track record of democratic peace, especially where it has been externally imposed, is modest at best.

Miles Pomper and Cole Harvey discuss the question of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. They explain how technological developments and the improved technical capacity of many developing countries have facilitated the access of some of the latter to the most lethal weapons. The problem is further complicated by the so-called dual-use dilemma, denoting several critical materials for weapons of this type are useful for civilian purposes as well. Although the current nonproliferation regime is under strain (especially with respect to verifications), the chapter concludes that the core of this regime (consisting of the three treaties) should be preserved and updated to the changing needs of our times.

Andreas Gofas explores the merits of the prevailing assumption that 9/11 signifies the appearance of a new type of terrorism. The author argues that contemporary terrorism is not as distinct as has been suggested in terms of operational range, motives and tactics. Gofas notes that the old-versus-new terrorism debate is not just an academic exercise but expresses the quest for legitimisation for more assertive counterterrorism policies that often impinge upon civil liberties. The chapter challenges the notion that democracies are more vulnerable to terrorism and promotes a re-evaluation of the trade-off between security and civil liberties.

Finally, Anthony Glees and Julian Richards assess in their contribution the counterterrorism policies of Western democracies. In contrast with Gofas, these two authors attempt to demonstrate the changing nature of the threat by highlighting the – until recently – unnoticed domestic (so-called home-grown) dimension of international terrorism, particularly in the US and the UK. Glees and Richards express concern about the diminished support in Western societies for both internal and external anti-terrorist policies, and they urge the authorities to stay the course. However, they recommend that Western countries should privilege intelligence-led instead of police or military operations.

Taken as a whole, this book scrutinises the question of change and continuity over several aspects of contemporary international politics. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the comprehension of the international system's ongoing transformation.

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International Politics in Times of Change

Tzifakis, N. (Ed.)

2012, XXV, 334 p. 3 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-642-21954-2