

Spring 4-28-2015

Escaping Thucydides' Trap: Change, Conflict, and the Future of the American-led Order

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Escaping Thucydides' Trap: Change, Conflict, and the Future of the American-led Order

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Published 28 April 2015*

Abstract

For centuries the discourse surrounding change in the international system has revolved around Thucydides' thesis that change and conflict are synonymous as great powers rise and fall. This argument has regularly provided a historical model for major change in the international system. It remains pertinent today as the rise of new great powers – particularly Brazil, India, and China – have fundamentally altered the balance of power in the international system. This has resulted in an international order increasingly susceptible to pressures for change across economic, political, and structural spectrums. In this study I argue that as power shifts from Europe to Asia and Latin America over the coming decades change is inevitable, but violent conflict is not. I outline how the United States can reduce the potential for conflict by responding to the changing international structure, accepting incremental change that does not go against the fundamental character of the current order while avoiding a buildup of pressure that could lead to systemic conflict. I measure how effective the American response to international change has been over the past two decades, and where appropriate suggest where the United States could modify its approach to avoid falling into the historical Thucydides' trap.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the help and support of a number of individuals. First and foremost are my parents, without their constant support and encouragement I never would have made it to Macalester, let alone been able to embark on a project of this magnitude. Also essential to this project were Professors Andrew Latham and David Blaney, without their advising, editing, and cajoling I could never have completed this project on time (if at all). Special thanks as well to my friends and housemates, who put up with near my near constant complaints, occasional breakdowns, and endless need to discuss my project no matter the hour or context. An additional thank you to Ashley Dunn, who's last-minute research assistance made an important contribution to my final draft. Finally, I'd like to thank the entire Macalester political science department (and in particular Roxy and her wonderful student workers) for endless cheer, support, and of course, caffeine. I couldn't have done it without all of you.

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I Introduction

What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear that this inspired in Sparta ~ Thucydides on the Cause of the Peloponnesian War¹

International orders do not last forever. Throughout history, rulers have struggled to cultivate amity and contain enmity between different political communities...yet each of the aforementioned orders eventually proved finite. ~ Andrew Phillips on War, Religion and Empire²

In the town of Kodari on the border between Chinese occupied Tibet and Nepal there is a small secondary school named Shree Kodari.³ The only public school within a four-hour walk of the town, until 2012 it offered classes only through grade six. That changed in 2012, when a donation from the Chinese ambassador to Nepal facilitated the construction of a third story to the Shree Kodari School and an expansion of its curriculum to include Chinese language instruction as well as regular classes through twelfth grade. That initial donation, along with the continued support of the Nepal China Himalaya Friendship Society, has given students near the border a tremendous advantage in finding jobs in what remains one of the most impoverished states in the world. It has also sparked some anger among the locals, who believe that the Chinese wield an oversized influence in Nepal.

Though Nepal stands at the crossroads of India and China, for centuries it has been within India's sphere of influence, sharing the same religions, written script, and a tied currency. Over the last few years China has been challenging this relationship, and

¹ Thucydides, Book 1, 1.23-[6].

² Phillips: 2011, 1.

³ All research for this section was undertaken in September 2013 as part of a project for the School of International Training. Information was gathered from interviews with locals translated by Pema lhamo.

today Chinese hydroelectric plants power Nepal's towns and villages, Chinese roads link Lhasa to Kathmandu, and travel occurs with increased frequency, and Chinese built schools teach Chinese to Nepalese children who hope to one-day travel to find work in China.⁴ All but invisible outside of Nepal itself, the struggle is easy to pass-off as a minor competition for influence in a small country with no real strategic or economic value.

I argue that, to the contrary, the Shree Kodari school – and the larger competition it is a small part of – are indicative of significant change occurring at many levels across the entirety of the international system. Economic shifts have allowed India, China, and Brazil to step onto the world stage as rising great powers, able to articulate independent national interests within often conflicting views of how the international system should be structured in the coming decades. This economic shift is already spilling over into other spheres, translating into calls for structural changes in the international order and shifts in regional military balances of power around the world.

The current international system was largely shaped by the United States in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the norms and institutions that were put into place continue to have a profound impact on how states interact with one another. This international system has proved resilient to change thus far, surviving the ideological struggles of the Cold War and resulting in one of the longest recorded periods of great power peace in history, but it has always been premised on the ability of the United States to prevent major challenges to the status quo and overcome minor ones.⁵ This ability has been seriously eroded over the past few decades. The economic rise of Brazil, China, and India, the revitalization of Russia, and the continuous drain on United States

⁴ Bhaskar: 2010

⁵ Levy: 1983, 88-91.

resources from instability in North Africa and the Middle East all constrain the ability of the United States to maintain the stability of the international system. The result is an international system that is moving towards disequilibrium, a period in which change at all levels of power across all the world's regions is possible.

Change can be beneficial to systems and societies; the alternative is stagnation, a seemingly inevitable slowdown in economic growth, social mobility, technological innovation, and exploration.⁶ The same is true of international systems, and the rise of new great powers is an opportunity to right some of the historical wrongs that have been perpetuated by the current system, such as the disparity in standard of living between the global north and global south. Yet change is also an inherently difficult and dangerous process, particularly when applied to the entirety of the world's international order. As states' relative power shifts the potentials for miscommunications and confrontation increase dramatically, and historically major change to the international system has been accompanied by horrific wars that have devastated the states that took part in them.⁷

It was change and its resulting uncertainty that Thucydides blamed for the Peloponnesian War that ended the Greek golden age at the end of the 5th century BC. According to his interpretation, the rise of Athenian power relative to Sparta made

⁶ History is full of examples of stagnated societies. Consider that in 1500 an objective observer would have predicted from relative levels of economic wealth, military power, and technological innovation that the Ottoman Turks, Ming Chinese, or Mogul Indians would come to prominence instead of the Europeans. Instead, a deeply fractured and competitive Europe was forced to innovate and change, and as a result grew at a rapid rate while China, India, and the Ottoman Empire – without significant internal or external motivation to change – stagnated for centuries until they were eventually overcome by European colonizers who had surpassed them by nearly all traditional indices of national power. See Kennedy: 1987, 3-30.

⁷ The most recent example of a war accompanying a major change within the international system resulted in approximately 80 million fatalities, destroyed most of Europe, North Africa, and East Asia, and ended only after two nuclear weapons were used on major population centers.

conflict between the two increasingly likely, as Sparta interpreted the rise of Athens as an existential threat.⁸ This explanation for international conflict has remained popular to this day, and modern scholars such as Kennedy, Gilpin, Amitav, and Ferguson have applied Thucydides' argument to suggest that the relative decline of the United States will inevitably lead to conflict with one or more rising states. Kennedy and Gilpin in particular argue that changing economic power inevitably leads to changing distributions of military power, and that this shift in turn leads to the decline of the reigning power, conflict leading to the demise of the system it created, and the creation of a new international system led by the victorious power or powers.⁹

In this study I argue against the inevitability of this scenario. Change is inevitable, and the shifts that have occurred to the relative distributions of power throughout the international system are undeniable and unlikely to reverse themselves. Despite this, I believe that the United States has the capacity to continue leading the international system well into the foreseeable future, and that this continued leadership does not need to come at the price of direct military confrontation with the rising powers. If the United States proves willing and able to accommodate the rise of new great powers, if the rising powers do not misinterpret the magnitude of America's relative decline or come into conflict with each other, and if all the involved states avoid serious misunderstandings or miscommunications, then I argue that the rising powers – China, India, and Brazil – can be accommodated within the bounds of the existing international system without resorting to the traditional instability and violence that has accompanied previous rising powers.

⁸ Thucydides, Book 1, 1.23.

⁹ Kennedy: 1987, 536-540 and Gilpin: 1981, 231-244.

In section two I examine existing theories about the nature of change in the international system and explore some of the existing works from the “declinist literature” on the future of American power. I then focus on the four rising great powers of India, Brazil, China, and Russia in section three, discuss how each has the potential to affect the international system, and explore some of the challenges that they must overcome before becoming genuine great powers. In my fourth section I widen my scope to analyze how the rise of these powers will constrain American action abroad and act as catalysts for change in four critical regions around the world – the Western Hemisphere, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East and Africa. Finally, in section five I discuss the steps the United States has taken to respond to these changes so far such as the proposed TPP and TTIP trade initiatives and the purported pivot to Asia. Where appropriate, I outline changes the United States could enact to better to preserve the stability of the international system by accepting incremental reform while maintaining the existing norms and institutions.

Fifty years ago Kodari was a tiny village almost entirely dependent on subsistence farming for its income. Today it has almost quadrupled in size due to the growing commerce between Nepal and China. Its citizens make a living selling Coca-Cola alongside local sweets to the endless stream of truck drivers passing between the two nations, and they go home to watch Hollywood and Bollywood films on TVs powered by Chinese electric dams. This is the face of the coming world, a space in which no single power dominates any metric of power. If the existing and rising great powers can adapt to this changing environment, than the world has the potential to benefit from the innovations that enhanced competition and cooperation will bring. If they cannot, than

the alternative may be a 21st century every bit as bloody as the one preceding it. Mitigating this risk, and ensuring that change and conflict are no longer synonymous, must be the primary goal of the world's states in the decades to come.

II Theorizing Decline

Introduction

Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* fundamentally altered the debate over the nature of change in the international system. In it, he analyzes the last five hundred years of great power relations. Kennedy's primary thesis is that the rise and fall of great powers in the international system directly correlates to their ever-changing relative economic power.¹⁰ Furthermore, he argues that established great powers have a tendency to over-extend themselves (what he terms "imperial overstretch") by spending too large a proportion of their GDP on maintaining the status quo, retarding investment in more productive ventures.¹¹ The result is that established great powers are overtaken by newer, faster developing states, which eventually convert their economic gains to military power. Once the perceived power of the revisionist state(s) equals the perceived power of the established one(s), the result has historically been hegemonic war and profound instability within the international system.¹²

Kennedy applies this theory of the rise and fall of great powers to the position of the United States at the beginning of the 1980s. Kennedy argues that the United States faces the same challenges to its supremacy that previous great powers have, despite modern developments such as the United Nations, the interconnectedness of the global political economy, and the advent of nuclear weapons.¹³ Kennedy's conclusion is that the United States is in a state of decline that will only grow worse in the coming decades as a

¹⁰ Kennedy: 1987, xv-xvi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 515.

¹² *Ibid.*, xxiii-xxiv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 538.

result of the age-old processes of imperial overstretch and the challenges posed by new powers such as Japan and China.¹⁴

Kennedy's work had important implications for the existing scholarly debate over the nature and extent of American decline and its implications for the international system. This debate has continued into the present, and political scientists continue to publish articles and books about whether the United States is, in fact, in an irreversible state of decline.¹⁵

This intellectual fervor has developed despite the fact that recent events have disproved many of Kennedy's predictions about the end of the 20th century. On the basis of his theory, Kennedy predicted the rise of Japan's power to an extent that has clearly not occurred (and does not seem likely anytime soon), and he failed to predict the fall of the Soviet Union within a decade of the publication of his work. These events do not diminish the scholarly quality of Kennedy's work or the fundamental validity of his theory on the rise and fall of great powers.¹⁶ They do, however, suggest that additional work remains to be done in analyzing the historical processes of change and conflict in the international system and applying them to the current decline of the United States. In this project I intend to do just that, extending Kennedy's theory to take into account the

¹⁴ Ibid., 538.

¹⁵ Two of the most recent examples of this debate are Amitav Acharya's *The End of American World Order* that argues that the world has moved beyond American hegemony, and Joseph Nye's *Is the American Century Over?* that makes the case for continued American influence. See Acharya: 2014 and Nye: 2015.

¹⁶ Kennedy's inaccurate predictions are hardly unique, and the difficulty of predicting future events is well known. Nevertheless, his attempts to do so did yield some useful conclusions, including the weakness of the USSR and the importance of not over relying on economic data alone.

volatile changes of the turn of the 21th century and placing his work in the context of existing accounts of change and conflict in the international system.

To do so, I draw on the existing rich literature that has developed in the wake of Kennedy's canonical work. Scholars such as Robert Gilpin, George Modelski, Robert Keohane, Hedley Bull, and John Mearsheimer have developed a number of interwoven theories founded in historical analysis in an attempt to answer some of the questions made relevant by Kennedy's prediction of American decline: How did the current international system come into being? What structural forces are responsible for maintaining order within it? What causes change and conflict in the international system? And, perhaps most relevant of all, must all major change in the international system result in conflict?

The International System

Before attempting to answer any of the above questions several more fundamental ones must be explored. These include: what, exactly, is the international system? What do concepts such as "change" and "conflict" mean in relation to it? How do related notions of hegemony and disequilibrium factor into this debate?

In *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz defines the international-political system in terms of its structure and units. He argues that the latter are comprised of states, and that the former is characterized by the condition of anarchy.¹⁷ States are the "units" of international systems because the interactions of states define the structure of

¹⁷ Waltz: 1979, 88.

the international system.¹⁸ An international system is comprised of multiple states that interact with one-another in a “self-help” society in which no supreme power exists that can provide for the security of the state, which must look out for its own survival. This results in an international structure in which states are primarily concerned with their own security and survival, although this is never their sole objective. Thus, a state is a political entity with sovereignty over a given territory, and an international system is a structure in which multiple states interact and influence one another.

In the 1970s Hedley Bull coined the term “international society” to refer to international systems that have additional, shared characteristics.¹⁹ In international societies, states “conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.”²⁰ Not all international systems have been international societies; Bull uses the example of the Ottoman empire, which for centuries was part of the European dominated international system without being a recognized member of any international society.²¹ The key difference between the two is that cooperation between states is significantly easier within an international society because of the shared values and institutions that foster trust among them.

Although an international system or society involves the interactions of multiple states, this does not suggest that all the states of a particular system are equal. Indeed, all international systems are characterized by a hierarchy of states, with no two states

¹⁸ Ibid., 92-94. It is important to note that by “state” Waltz mean a “sovereign political entity.” This definition encompasses multiple iterations of the state such as city-states and empires, not just the modern “nation-state.”

¹⁹ Bull: 1977, 10.

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ Ibid., 14.

possessing exactly the same level of power.²² Typically, the states that comprise an international system are divided into “great powers” and lesser powers, with the former receiving the overwhelming majority of analysis from historians and international relations theorists alike.

In this work I will utilize Jack Levy’s definition of a great power as having five distinct characteristics. First, a great power must play a major role in the security of an international system, or at a minimum have relative self-sufficiency with respect to military power. Second, a great power’s interests and objectives must be continental or global, not merely regional. Third, a great power ought to defend these interests and objectives more aggressively than other, lesser powers. Fourth, great powers are perceived as “great” by other powers, that is, lesser powers recognize the unique influence wielded by great powers and defer to them accordingly. Finally, great powers are often (though not always) formally designated as such by international laws, treaties, or membership in organizations.²³ Bull establishes his own three criteria for great power status: first, there must be two or more powers of comparable status in an international system, second, a great power must be in the “front rank” of military status, and third,

²² By power I refer to the definition developed by Steven Lukes in “Power, A Radical View,” in which he argues that, “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests.” (Lukes: 2005, 37). This definition of power includes the ability of one state to compel another to submit to its will using over force or persuasion when there is conflict between them *and* to prevent such a conflict from ever coming to the surface in the first place. These abilities are commonly referred to as hard and soft power and structural power respectively. See also Bull: 1977.

²³ Levy: 1983, 16-17.

great powers must be recognized by their own people as having an oversized influence in world affairs.²⁴

The conventional wisdom is that international systems are defined and maintained by great powers, with lesser powers having a minor role at best in system maintenance or change.²⁵ In this work I largely adopt this assumption, though I take into account some of the impacts that lesser powers can have on the stability of the international system. Traditionally, international systems have been characterized by the relative ranking of the great powers active within them. Thus, an international system with one overwhelmingly dominant great power is commonly referred to as unipolar, one with two roughly equal powers as bipolar, one with three as tripolar, and one with four or more equal great powers as multipolar.

The modern international society has several unique characteristics that influence the behavior of its actors. It is, first and foremost, truly global in nature. Historical international systems (such as the Hellenistic league and Imperial China) tended to be regional in size, limited by the sophistication of communicational and transportation technologies of their time. The modern international system is largely unconstrained by these limitations, and excluding a few isolated tribes spread throughout the periphery, incorporates nearly all the world's habitable land and impacts practically the entire human race.

²⁴ Bull: 1977, 200-202. The key distinction between this definition and Levy's is the Levy added the additional qualifications of external recognition of great power status by foreign governments, peoples, and international institutions and laws. I believe that these are essential for modern great power status, and as such follow Levy's definition of a great power.

²⁵ See the works of Kennedy, Levy, Gilpin, Bull, Mearsheimer, and Modelski for examples of this trend.

The principal actors of the modern state system are nation-states, a subset of states that extend their sovereignty over a set geographical area and (relatively) culturally homogenous population. Furthermore, the current international system is also an international society, though the extent of this society remains contested.²⁶ What does seem apparent is that there are some fundamental norms (such as the Geneva convention and the prohibition against using nuclear weapons) and institutions (such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund) that are shared by nearly all participants in the international system. There are also important cultural and ethnic divisions that have historically split the international system, the most important of which is the separation between the prosperous “west” – an economically, politically, and culturally connected group of status quo powers – and the “rest” – itself a culturally diverse set of underdeveloped and developing states.

Characterizing the polarity of the modern international system is a somewhat trickier endeavor. Even the current number of great powers is contentious, with no commonly agreed upon number.²⁷ What is clear is that of the modern great powers, the United States is by far the strongest. Militarily, politically, and (to a much lesser extent) economically, the United States is unchallenged and unrivaled as the single dominant state of the international system. Thus, the modern international system might be seen as a unipolar system, although the rise of several, competing powers may soon challenge this order. The bulk of this study is devoted to examining the implications of the rise of

²⁶ One example of this is Huntington, who argues that the differences between civilizations preclude any overall shared values among states. See Huntington: 1996.

²⁷ For example Kennedy argues that Japan should count as a great power on the basis of its economic power, Bull that it should not because it lacks a first rate military or nuclear weapons.

these states. First, though, I define the characteristics of a unipolar or hegemon-dominated international system in greater detail.

Hegemony

The concept of hegemony is one of the most contested in the international relations field, and nearly every issue related to it remains fiercely debated. It is beyond the scope and scale of this study to do full justice to any of these issues, but I outline below some of the most crucial questions about hegemony in the international system. The most basic of these is what does the concept of hegemony mean in the context of the international system? How does a hegemonic power differ from a great power? And is hegemony merely “imperialism with good manners” or is it somehow distinct from more coercive forms of control?²⁸ Are hegemonic powers necessary, neutral, or detrimental to the stability of the international system? In answering these questions scholars use differing definitions of what hegemony means. Mearsheimer distinguishes between regional and global hegemonies, while Bull separates hegemony from “dominance,” and “primacy.”²⁹ Arrighi and Modelski argue that hegemonic power cycles over the long term, Gilpin that cyclical change has been supplanted in the modern world by a succession of hegemonies.³⁰ Keohane writes that hegemonic powers do not stabilize the international system; Ikenberry and Posen contend that they do.³¹

In this paper I will use a simplified definition of hegemony as the economic, social, and military dominance by one state of the international system. I follow Gilpin’s

²⁸ Schwarzenberger: 1959 cited in Bull: 1977, 216.

²⁹ See Mearsheimer: 2001 and Bull: 1977.

³⁰ See Arrighi: 1994, Modelski: 1978, Kennedy: 1987, and Gilpin: 1981.

³¹ See Keohane: 1984, Ikenberry: 2014, and Posen: 2003.

lead in distinguishing hegemonic states such as Great Britain in the European state system and Athens in the classical-Greek world from empires such as Rome and classic China.³² The primary distinction between the two is that a hegemonic power is the “first among equals” within an international system, while an empire’s power so overwhelms other states that there are effectively no other great powers in the international system they inhabit.³³ Some scholars, such as Ferguson, argue that the United States should be classified as an empire, citing its military, economic, and soft power superiority over potential rivals.³⁴ Although some of these arguments are intriguing, they are ultimately unhelpful in understanding the change and conflict that might develop from a decline in American power. I will, therefore, follow Nexon and Wright, who argue that “questions such as ‘is America an empire?’ or ‘is the international system an imperial one?’ obscure more than they reveal.”³⁵ The US is the leader of the modern international system, with an oversized influence in global security and financial institutions with the world’s largest military and economy, but it is certainly not without competitors.

The United States has reaped enormous benefits from its leadership of the international system. Economically, the United States has benefited from a global financial system that it largely created in the aftermath of the Second World War, and it wields significant power in many of the international economic institutions such as the IMF. Militarily, the United States enjoys a virtually unchallenged “command of the commons,” the crucially important air and sea-lanes of commerce.³⁶ Finally, the ideology

³² Gilpin: 1981, 147.

³³ Violating Bull’s first requirement for great powers.

³⁴ Ferguson: 2005.

³⁵ Nexon and Wright: 2007, 266.

³⁶ Posen: 2003.

of democratic free trade and culture in the form of music and movies have become worldwide exports, granting the United States (admittedly tacit) international acquiescence of American leadership.³⁷

The above statement makes the implicit assumption that the United States acts in some sense as a “stabilizer” of the international system and preforms some tasks that are necessary for what Gilpin terms “system maintenance,” including maintaining the security of the global commons (traditionally this meant freedom of the sea, but in the modern world has been extended to the air and perhaps space as well) and the principles of the current world order (today free trade, an international monetary system, and the right of self-determination).³⁸ Some scholars such as Keohane contest this theory, arguing that hegemons are unnecessary for international stability.³⁹ Nevertheless, I will proceed with the conventional view that the decline of American hegemony will lead to a decrease in international cooperation and an increase in conflict. In doing so I adopt the views of Kennedy and Gilpin that the decline of a hegemon inevitably leads to disequilibrium in the international system, but not that disequilibrium must also lead to violent conflict.

Disequilibrium

It is most profitable to begin the definition of disequilibrium in the international system with the opposing state of equilibrium. I adopt Gilpin’s definition that “an

³⁷ By tacit acquiescence I do not suggest that the international community has subordinated itself to the will of the United States. What I do contend is that America has (thus far) avoided the sort of counter-balancing and instability that realists such as Waltz argue should develop in a unipolar order. That this has not occurred can, I believe, be largely attributed to American soft power.

³⁸ Gilpin: 1981, 144-145.

³⁹ Keohane: 1984, 143-162.

international system is stable (i.e. in a state of equilibrium) if no great power believes it profitable to attempt to change the system.”⁴⁰ Thus, an international system is stable when the costs to any one state of changing the system outweigh any perceived benefits it might gain from doing so (note that stability as I use it here is a relative term, a system is never completely stable as there is always an underlying level of jockeying among great powers). Yet stability in the international system is never permanent. Gilpin explanation is that:

An international system is established for the same reason that any social or political system is created; actors enter social relations and create social structures in order to advance particular sets of political, economic, or other types of interests. Because the interests of some of the actors may conflict with those of other actors, the particular interests that are most favored by these social arrangements tend to reflect the relative powers of the actors involved.⁴¹

Disequilibrium develops because this hierarchal structure of the international system results in a paradox. The strength of the hegemon is necessary to maintain the stability of the international system, but the exercise of this influence causes resentment among the other great powers, spurring potential challengers and leading to disequilibrium. As long as the states within an international system (or at least a system’s great powers) acquiesce to this hierarchy, the system remains in a state of equilibrium.⁴²

Eventually, however, the hierarchy of power and prestige within an international system shifts. Kennedy summarizes this trend by stating:

⁴⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁴¹ Ibid., 9.

⁴² Gilpin: 1981, 45. An international system remains at a state of equilibrium as long as the underlying conflicts inevitable between states do not so fundamentally alter the structure of the system or the distribution of resources among the great powers that they attempt to change the system.

As far as the international system is concerned, wealth and power, or economic strength and military strength, are always relative... Since they are relative, and since all societies are subject to the inexorable tendency to change, then the international balances can *never* be still.⁴³

Societies change and develop at differing rates, upsetting the power structure of the international system. Moreover, this change is likely to adversely affect established powers and benefit newly arrived ones.⁴⁴ New (or newly revitalized) great powers become disenchanted with an international system they see as unfairly benefiting the old, established powers. Eventually, a state or alliance of states perceives that the benefits of attempting to change the international system outweigh the potential costs. Once this occurs an international system has entered a state of disequilibrium.

Identifying disequilibrium as it develops and creating criteria for measuring the extent of disequilibrium within a given system is significantly more difficult than merely stating its existence. The above definition of disequilibrium is, of course, an ideal type, a concept that never exists in reality exactly as I have stated it here. Adding to this difficulty is the fact that states often misread the extent to which disequilibrium is present in the international system. Thus, some states attempt to change the international system when the potential benefits do not outweigh the costs, while others fail to act when conditions are favorable for change. An example of the former is Germany in both World Wars and, of the latter, the United States in the early 20th century.⁴⁵

⁴³ Kennedy: 1987, 536.

⁴⁴ This occurs for a variety of factors, but the most prevalent that Kennedy and Gilpin identify is the tendency for “imperial overstretch” on the part of the system’s hegemon. As Gilpin writes “the tendency is for the economic costs of maintaining the status quo to rise faster than the economic capacity to support the status quo” (Gilpin: 1981, 11).

⁴⁵ For an analysis of the former see Copeland: 2009. For the latter see Kennedy: 1987.

Although the extent to which disequilibrium exists in a system is difficult to define, the direction a system is heading is somewhat easier to ascertain. If we conceive of a continuum representing the potential for change in an international system, with equilibrium at one extreme and disequilibrium at the other, the direction a particular system is moving is easier to judge and more conceptually useful than its position on the continuum at a given time. This distinction is important because for the remainder of this study my two overriding objectives are to demonstrate that the current international system is moving towards disequilibrium, and to explore what might happen once it arrives. First, I will examine and define the two related concepts of change and conflict in the international system.

Change and Conflict in the International System

This study focuses on whether or not change and conflict are synonymous in the context of the international system. This requires understanding some fundamental questions involving change as it relates to the international system. The most important of these is whether a change to the international system necessitates conflict? a more general question is what do the concepts mean in relationship to the international system? Finally, do certain types or levels of change result in certain conflicts? Change in the international system occurs once a system reaches a state of disequilibrium, leading to a “crisis in the international system.”⁴⁶ Gilpin identifies three distinct levels of change in the international system: interaction change, systemic change, and systems change. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and often one type of change is preceded by or

⁴⁶ Gilpin: 1981, 15.

results in another. Nevertheless, I will briefly define the three levels separately before examining the types of conflict they can lead to.

Interaction change involves changes in the interactions between states in the international system. Interaction change is the lowest level of change in the international system, and does not impact the overall hierarchy of power and prestige in the system. It does, however, frequently result in a change to the rights and rules of an international system.⁴⁷ Example of interaction change include the creation of an international institution such as the International Monetary Fund to regulate international finance or a relatively minor war between two states that results in a small redistribution of territory without affecting the overall balance of power within the international system. Interaction changes are the most common in the international system, but they are also typically the least momentous. As such I will follow Gilpin's lead in focusing on the remaining two types of change in the international system.

The next level of analysis Gilpin identifies is systemic change. Systemic change involves the leadership of the international system, or "the replacement of a declining dominant power by a rising dominant power."⁴⁸ It is systemic change that Gilpin refers to when describing the inevitable result of disequilibrium in the international system, and systemic change at this level is his primary focus. This attitude is mirrored in Kennedy and Levy, and indeed, a fascination with systemic change can be traced back to Thucydides.⁴⁹ Systemic change is momentous because the new hegemonic power of an

⁴⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁹ This is not to say this approach has been non-contentious. In one recent publication Lebow and Valentino challenge Gilpin's theoretical assumptions about the nature of change in the international system, asserting that power transitions between first and second-rank powers (i.e.

international system commonly changes the rules and institutions of the system to better suit its own interests. This generally leads to a fundamental reordering of the international system. The most recent example of systemic change has been the fall of the British Empire and its replacement by the United States.⁵⁰

Systems change is Gilpin's largest level of analysis. It refers to a change in the character of the international system itself.⁵¹ If all of the international system is thought of as one great game played among the great powers; interaction changes are minor changes of the rules of the game, systemic changes are changes of the hierarchy of the great powers – in effect, changes to which players are “winning,” and systems changes are changes to the nature of the game itself, most commonly via a change in the character of its players. Great powers have always been states, but the character of the states has changed from city-states to empires to the modern nation-states, with several other manifestations in between. These are all systems changes. Systems change is less common in the international system than other change, and is the most significant to its

systemic change) are extremely rare, and that the only transitions since 1640 have been Russia surpassing Spain in 1715, and the United States surpassing Russia in 1865 (Lebow and Valentino: 2009, 397-398). These troubling findings are, however, explained by Lebow and Valentino's measure of power as a multiplication of a country's population by its GDP (Ibid., 396). This simplistic formula fails to take into account any number of crucial factors that influence a state's ability to effect the international system, from its geographic position to its alliance system to its level of industrialization. These factors matter, and help explain how Great Britain managed to conquer a quarter of the world's landmass without ever reaching the first tier of Lebow and Valentino's power scale.

⁵⁰ It is interesting to note that this systemic change was atypical in several ways. First, although the United States has condemned imperialism and helped create numerous new institutions (such as the UN), the fundamental character of the international system centered around the principle of liberal, free trade has not changed. Second, there was an unusual period of anarchy at the beginning of the 20th during which the United States refused to initiate systemic change despite ample opportunity to do so. Finally, when the United States finally did succeed Great Britain it did so without engaging in hegemonic war against Great Britain (although the two states did, of course, fight together in two hegemonic wars against the German and Japanese bids for hegemony).

⁵¹ Gilpin: 1981, 41.

structure. It often results in periods of anarchy or a-polarity. Some historical examples of this anarchy are the unrest in Greece after the decline of the Greek city-states and the thirty years war that preceded the rise of the modern nation-state in the early 1600s.⁵²

These three levels of change are the primary mechanisms by which disequilibrium occurs and is resolved in the international system. As was stated earlier, the three categories are not mutually exclusive, and the international system can (and often does) experience change at multiple levels simultaneously. Each of these levels of change causes or involves conflict in the everyday sense of the word, but in this context I define conflict in the international system as violent conflict between states. Each type of change has its own unique type of conflict.

Interaction change generally results in (relatively) low intensity conflicts such as trade wars, wars not involving great powers, and violent conflict that stops short of war (such as terrorism, covert operations, and sabotage). Interaction conflicts can cause tremendous human suffering and lead to the destruction or birth of one or more states, but they do not generally affect the structure of the international system as a whole.⁵³

Systemic change commonly corresponds with an entirely different category of conflict. When systemic change (or attempts at systemic change) leads to open war, the result has been some of the most destructive conflicts in human history. Levy identifies nine such conflicts in the five hundred years of the modern international system, including five wars that have resulted in one million or more fatalities.⁵⁴ These

⁵² For historical analysis of these periods Phillips: 2011, 17-28.

⁵³ The exception is when, as is often the case, interaction change is a precursor to, or result of, systemic or systems change.

⁵⁴ Levy: 1983, 88-91. These conflicts are: the two World Wars, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars (which Levy treats as a single conflict), the War of Austrian Succession, and

“hegemonic wars” are characterized by the participation of most, if not all, great powers in an international system, the geographic and numerical scale of the conflicts, and the uncommonly high level of destruction they result in. In the roughly five hundred-year history of the current international system there has not been a single systemic change that has not resulted in (or been the result of) a hegemonic war.⁵⁵

Conflict that leads to systems change is more difficult to identify or define than those which involve systemic or interaction change. The primary reason for this is that systems change generally takes place alongside systemic change, and the two types of conflict can prove difficult to separate. An example of this is the Thirty Years War, which was a hegemonic war that also influenced systems change.⁵⁶ It is easier to identify systems change by the period of anarchy that follows it than it is to find a single conflict that causes it. Thus the fall of the Roman Empire was a systems change that led to centuries of anarchy in the European state system, but it is difficult to identify a single conflict that led to the fall of the Empire.⁵⁷ If future systems change follows in this historical pattern, it will likely be more remembered for the anarchy that ensues than for the conflict or conflicts that preceded it.

the Thirty Years War. Note that this data only includes wars within the European state system through the 20th century.

⁵⁵ Note that this does not imply that all the conflicts have been between a rising state and a declining one. See the example of Great Britain and the United States.

⁵⁶ Phillips: 2011, 127-136.

⁵⁷ See Gibbon: 1776 for what remains the best historical analysis of the decline of the Roman Empire.

Conclusion

Historically, disequilibrium in the international system has developed as the costs to the leading hegemon of maintaining the system have outstripped the hegemon's ability to enforce order. Other, rising powers challenge the established states and change the hierarchy of power and prestige, seeking to restructure the international system in their own favor. Once a challenging state believes that the perceived benefits of changing the system outweigh the possible costs, the international system has entered a state of disequilibrium.

Once disequilibrium develops, it is either resolved when the established power successfully reestablishes equilibrium, or it results in interaction, systemic, or systems change. Systemic and systems change are particularly serious, as neither has taken place outside the context of a hegemonic war or series of wars. In their respective books, Kennedy and Gilpin apply these concepts to the modern international system to predict future change within it.

I utilize this approach in studying how the rise of new great powers has contributed to disequilibrium in the international system. I examine the levels of change that might result from a move towards disequilibrium and the potential for conflict these changes could create. I study the ways in which the United States has so far attempted to react to change to the global order, and where appropriate suggest ways in which the United States could act to reduce disequilibrium and attempt to prevent change leading to conflict.

III The New Great Powers

The Rise of the Modern International System

Two numbers documenting the transformation of the modern international system stand out. At the end of the 19th century, the United States controlled 14.7 percent of the relative shares of world manufacturing output. Within a half century, this share of world manufacturing had doubled to roughly a third of the total world manufacturing output.⁵⁸ Over that same period the United States military grew from a force of 34,000 to 12.5 million men.⁵⁹ These figures are important in two respects. They demonstrate that it is relatively easy for a wealthy industrialized state to embark on a massive armaments program over a short period of time, and they represent a remarkable shift in the economic and military balance of power of the international system. The simultaneous rise of Germany, Japan, Italy, and the Soviet Union led to two world wars and the fundamental transformation of the international system. The established European great powers were eclipsed by the rise of Russia and the United States, whose struggle for hegemony over the international system structured the second half of the 20th century.

The new international order shaped by the United States was characterized by principles of free trade, liberalism, and international rule of law. The United States enforced and shaped these principles through the creation of international institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Though these were international institutions, they were heavily influenced by American

⁵⁸ Kennedy: 1987, 202.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 203.

interests, and (at least at first) were largely dependent on American funds for their operation and American power for their legitimization.⁶⁰

When the Soviet Union recovered economically and militarily from the damage it had endured during the Second World War and successfully broke the American nuclear monopoly in 1949, it emerged as a peer competitor to the American dominated international system. The United States responded by further committing itself to the maintenance of the new international order, creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a military check to the Soviet Union and funding the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe.⁶¹ Under the doctrine of containment the United States expanded its political and military interests to regions of the globe where it had previously had only economic relations, including Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South East Asia.⁶² The end of the Cold War removed the last short-term challenge to American hegemony, and some scholars predicted that the international system was, after the bloodiest century in human history, finally stable.⁶³

Sadly, events of the previous two decades have done little to encourage this view. Instead, over the last twenty years the international system has slowly moved towards disequilibrium, not stability. The United States remains the world's strongest economic power, but its relative share of world wealth has declined significantly since the end of

⁶⁰ Keohane: 1984, 45.

⁶¹ Kennedy: 1987, 376.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 381.

⁶³ This statement implies an academic consensus that was, of course, rather lacking. Kennedy and Gilpin predicted American decline in the 1980s before the Cold War had even concluded, and serious resistance to this “declinist” argument did not emerge until after the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1990s (see Ikenberry: 2011b and Jones: 2014 for modern interpretations of this “anti-declinist” literature). Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, some academics argue that the current international system is unstable or in a state of disequilibrium (see Mearsheimer: 2001).

the Second World War.⁶⁴ This has largely been a result of the rise of new economic competitors, including Brazil, India, China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union. This economic competition has not yet translated to a direct military challenge to United States, except in one critically important arena. Since 1950 the club of nuclear-armed nations has expanded from only the US and USSR to encompass China, India, Pakistan, Israel, France, The UK, and North Korea.⁶⁵ These developments abroad have coincided with political gridlock, the emergence of neo-isolationism, and a massive budget deficit within the United States. The international system is not yet in a state of disequilibrium, and the vast majority of the world's states (and all of its great powers) continue to accept the legitimacy of American leadership of the international system.⁶⁶

The continued legitimacy of existing institutions and norms has greatly contributed to the stability of the international system, raising the potential costs to any state seeking to fundamentally change the current order.⁶⁷ As a result the majority of the challenges against the United States have occurred within the bounds of the system itself. When Russia confronts American diplomats it does so within the context of the United Nations in New York City, China condemns "American imperialism" while relying on the American Navy to maintain the security of the sea-lanes on which it depends to import the raw materials necessary for growth, and nearly every state on earth conducts

⁶⁴ As just one example, the American percentage of world GDP slipped from an artificial high of 47 percent in the aftermath of the Second World War to 27 percent in 2007 (Zakaria: 2008, 181).

⁶⁵ Jones: 2014, 133.

⁶⁶ I do not suggest that the great powers (and in particular the rising powers) are content with the structure of the international system, but merely that they are not currently inclined to change it.

⁶⁷ It would be unwise, however, to assume that a condition of interdependence is any guarantee against conflict, even great power conflict. Many prominent scholars and statesmen believed the same of Europe prior to the outbreak of the First World War, with tragic results. See Copeland: 2009.

the majority of their trade in American dollars, no matter their relations to Washington.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, as the economic balance continues to shift from the United States towards developing states in Asia, the Middle East, and South America the challenges to American hegemony are likely to increase.

In the following section I explore the elements of this international system that developed in the aftermath of the Second World War, identify the existing great powers, and explore how the rise new great powers – the BRIC nations of Brazil, Russia, India, and China – has constrained the ability of the United States to maintain hegemony over the international system.⁶⁹ I argue that this growth has not yet led to the imperial overstretch predicted by Kennedy and Gilpin, but it has spread American resources thin at a time when the United States faces challenges on all fronts. The emergence of Brazil has led to serious economic competition close to home, given rise to vocal support for reform of international monetary institutions, and weakened the centuries-old American hold over the western hemisphere. Russia's reemergence as a great power has forced the United States to recommit to the NATO alliance, boosting the number of soldiers the US stations in Europe and damaging American-European relations.⁷⁰ India, with its new Prime Minister and title as the world's largest democracy, can now successfully force significant interaction change and serve as an alternative to the American monopoly on

⁶⁸ For a particularly interesting analysis of the second phenomena see Jones: 2014.

⁶⁹ As will be explored below Russia and China are both existing great powers, but Russia has only recently returned to great power status after a two decade slump in the aftermath of the Cold War and China has just begun to assert global interests with the confidence of a great power.

⁷⁰ The United States has already increased air patrols over the Baltic, and some commentators suggest deploying a full United States brigade to vulnerable NATO members such as Latvia and Estonia at a cost of roughly ten billion dollars over the next five years (O'Hanlon: 2014).

soft power.⁷¹ Finally, China, with its booming economy, gigantic population, and regional political and military power, has the ability to force the United States to react to its rise, altering the distribution of power in the international system by its very existence.

The Modern Great Powers

An important factor that has lent stability to the international system in recent decades has been the relative harmony of interests among the existing great powers. Before exploring the rise of potential challengers to the international system it is, therefore, worth exploring which are the great powers, and why they have not shown the same willingness to compete for power and prestige that great powers historically have. Utilizing Levy's definition of a great power as having the following five characteristics: self-sufficiency with respect to military power, global interests or objectives, "aggressive" foreign policy (that is, an expressed willingness to defend international interests), recognition of great power status by other great powers, and, finally, formal designation of status by international laws, treaties, or membership in international organizations; I identify five current great powers: The United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom.⁷²

Levy's five criteria exclude several states that are sometimes considered – and indeed act – like great powers, notably Japan, India, and Germany. All three lack the institutional recognition of a seat on the UN security council. More importantly, Japan and Germany do not have the ability to properly defend themselves in the case of an attack,

⁷¹ An example of this interaction change is India's veto of a WTO reform bill, which it refused to lift until after the United States agreed to exempt India food stockpiles, which were banned under WTO guidelines on agricultural subsidies (Kumar, Hughes, and Miles: 2014).

⁷² Levy: 1983, 16-17.

although they could presumably remedy this within a few decades if they so choose.⁷³

India possesses a nuclear arsenal and a developed military, but has not yet fully articulated significant global interests, so is better categorized as a potential great power than a current one.

Of the five existing great powers, three – the United States, France and the United Kingdom – are status quo powers. They are the primary benefactors of the international order and – though they have certain strategic disagreements – are fundamentally united in preserving equilibrium in the system. China and Russia are not content with the international system as it is currently ordered. The struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States for control of the international system has already nearly led to one hegemonic war, and this conflict has not disappeared with the fall of the Soviet Union.⁷⁴ China is a new (or newly revitalized) great power, and although it is only the first of several rising nations to attain great power status, it has already substantially shifted the balance of power throughout the international system.⁷⁵ Thus of the five current great powers four are established and one, China, continues its rise economically and militarily.

⁷³ Although in both cases there are constitutional prohibitions against the use of military force for any offensive purposes, the greater defect in Japan and Germany's ability to defend themselves is their lack of nuclear weapons. I follow Bull in requiring a state to possess nuclear weapons before it can claim military independence (Bull: 1977, 202).

⁷⁴ Gilpin predicted that the Soviet Union would succeed in replacing the United States as the leader of the international system. Today's Russia doesn't have that potential or the ideological legitimacy that it once did (see Gilpin: 1981, 231-244). Nevertheless, it stands as an example to those states that chafe under American hegemony.

⁷⁵ For simplicity's sake I use the 1971 admittance of the People's Republic of China to the UN and UN security council as the year that China became a modern great power. I have explored some of the impacts of this shift in the below section on China.

The Rise of Challengers

Despite the Cold War, the modern international system has sustained a significant seven-decade long absence of great power war or serious challenge to the system.⁷⁶ Scholars have pointed to any number of potential causes of this stability, from free trade and economic interdependence and the proliferation of sovereign democratic governments to the destructive potential of modern nuclear weapons.⁷⁷ Despite these stabilizing factors, the international order is starting to appear less stable than it did even a few decades ago. Internally, the United States displays some alarming signs in its large debt, flat-lined middle class wages, and political stalemate. Domestic dissatisfaction with the costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has contributed to a new wave of neo-isolationism within the US, which has mirrored external dissatisfaction with how the United States has chosen to wield its power and influence abroad.⁷⁸ At the same time, new powers have risen in the preceding few decades at a truly astounding rate. In 2000 the combined GDPs of India, China, and Brazil accounted for only twenty percent of American GDP. By 2010, this proportion had risen to seventy-five percent.⁷⁹ In contrast to historical cases, this economic rise has not corresponded to a proportional shift in the military balance of power, but it remains unclear whether this represents a short-term lag or a longer-term disruption to historical trends.

It is easy to overstate the near-term implications of the economic rise of challengers to American hegemony. In a 2009 article Josef Joffe identifies five “waves”

⁷⁶ Ibid., 75. Levy identifies only one period of great power peace longer than ours, from the 1815 end of the Napoleonic War to the 1914 start of the First World War. Also, as Gilpin argues, the Cold War was more a struggle for control of the system than an attempt to overthrow it.

⁷⁷ See Keohane: 1984 and Ikenberry: 2011a.

⁷⁸ Ikenberry: 2014, 9.

⁷⁹ Jones: 2014, 11-12.

of declinist thinking among western intellectuals, beginning with “Sputnik shock” in the fifties.⁸⁰ In the sixties President Kennedy ‘s administration spoke of a “missile gap” with the Soviet Union. In the seventies the failure of the Vietnam War and the recovery of Europe prompted scholars and policy makers such as Nixon and Kissinger to predict the rise of a new multipolar order. In the eighties, Paul Kennedy prophesied the rise of Japan and the gradual decline of the United States.⁸¹ Of course, these predictions all proved to be misguided. The nineties were the only decade since the launch of Sputnik that didn’t result in any significant declinist literature, as the end of the Cold War and the economic woes of Japan gave rise to a new optimism in the enduring nature of the American-led international system.⁸²

Unfortunately, this optimism has been short lived. As early as 2001 Mearsheimer was predicting the end of the unipolar moment and the rise of a new multipolar order.⁸³ Since then, the United States has endured the terror of September 11th, the economic, political, and social costs of two unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the worst economic crisis since the great depression. All this has been accompanied by the rapid rise of the BRIC nations of Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Although these nations are not yet able to directly challenge the United States for control over the international system, their rise is nevertheless a momentous occasion.

Since the end of the Second World War the only great power to actively seek systemic change was the Soviet Union. Now Russia has already been joined by China in pushing for change (although their broader strategic aims are by no means identical), and

⁸⁰ Joffe: 2009, 1.

⁸¹ Kennedy: 1987, 538.

⁸² Joffe: 2009, 3.

⁸³ Mearsheimer: 2001, 399-402.

the future rise of two new great powers has the potential to fundamentally disrupt the equilibrium of the system by shifting the balance of power away from those nations that favor stability over change. Furthermore, these rising powers represent new forces that cannot be compelled by the United States, constraining its potential options for action (two examples of this are Russia's veto of UN resolutions attempting to end the Syrian Civil War and Brazil's blockage of American attempts to extend NAFTA to South America). These events have given rise to a new wave of predictions of American decline from scholar such as Ferguson, Friedberg, and Posen.⁸⁴ In the sections below I examine some of the challenges these BRIC states face as they continue to rise, and explore some of the implications of their success to the stability of the current international system.

Brazil

Many commentators looked at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil as something of a failure for the host nation.⁸⁵ The costs of hosting the match were astronomical; the Brazilian infrastructure was poorly equipped to handle the roughly one million foreigners who arrived for the cup, and the games were marred by political protests by Brazilians who believed their country should have focused on cutting corruption and reducing poverty instead of pouring money into an international sporting event.⁸⁶ The anger of the protesters demonstrates one of a multitude of problems Brazil must overcome if it is to continue its rise, from widespread poverty and unemployment to government corruption

⁸⁴ See Ferguson: 2004, Friedberg: 2011, and Posen: 2003.

⁸⁵ Fick: 2014.

⁸⁶ BBC News: 2014.

and inefficiency.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, if Brazil can overcome its current economic and social woes it has the potential to become a serious contender on the world stage and a great power in its own right.

The rise of Brazil has not been as triumphed or dramatic as that of the other BRIC nations. Brazil is not as populous as India and China, and its growth rate has been less dramatic, currently at a sluggish 2.3 percent.⁸⁸ Despite these setbacks, in the last thirty years the Brazilian economy has exhibited tremendous growth.⁸⁹ For the first time since the end of the Spanish-American war the United States faces a significant economic power in the western hemisphere. With the world's fifth largest landmass and population, a secure geographic position, and a stable (if new and sometimes faltering) democratic political system, Brazil will become an influential player on the global stage, even if does not make the diplomatic and military investments necessary to become a full-fledged great power.⁹⁰

Although Brazil's potential power is clear, its interests and objectives are significantly less so. Certainly, Brazil desires enhanced economic growth, which gives it a significant vested interest in preserving the stability of the current international order.

⁸⁷ In an article on the emerging 3rd world powers Jerry Harris accurately suggests that one of Brazil's greatest challenges will be to continue to grow (which requires somewhat conservative economic policy to attract foreign investors) while keeping Brazil's poor content (Harris: 2009, 24-25).

⁸⁸ The CIA World Factbook: 2014.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Brazil's current GDP is roughly ten times its size forty years ago.

⁹⁰ Diplomatically, Brazil has yet to articulate significant global interests beyond attempting interaction change such as challenging the representation and rules of global institutions, although Brazil has gained recent recognition for its role as an impartial mediator of international disputes – see its 2010 attempt to broker a nuclear deal between Iran and the US (Crandall: 2011). Militarily, Brazil must develop its armed forces to the extent that they can hold off any challenger in the western hemisphere other than the United States, and develop some form of nuclear deterrent. Though it appears Brazil does not currently seek this capacity – as it has already voluntarily suspended its previous nuclear program and signed the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, it retains the potential to rapidly restart its program if it so chooses.

Brazil also wants international influence and recognition, however, and if its attempts at gradual change and continually rebuffed by the established powers it is possible its drive for recognition will outweigh its desire for stability.⁹¹ Brazil has already fought and won important battles at the WTO against European and American agricultural subsidies, and when the United States attempted to extend NAFTA to South America via the Free Trade Area of the Americas, Brazil and Argentina scuttled the deal by refusing to sign.⁹² Furthermore, Brazilian multinational corporations are growing and proliferating, and in the face of American hostility, they are forming more joint ventures with Chinese companies.⁹³ These economic ties are already beginning to turn political, and Brazilian and Chinese leaders now speak of a “new South-South relationship.”⁹⁴

The United States should take such developments seriously. Brazil lacks the military or political capability to directly challenge the United States; it’s not a member of the nuclear club, and its focus on economic development will make it leery of attempting to significantly challenge the status quo of the international system in the short-term. But Brazil is an emerging power, and as it continues to grow it will exert itself with greater force as it seeks to challenge what it sees as unfair aspects of the international order. If the United States continues to oppose these efforts it risks turning Brazil from an economic competitor into a strategic one, and converting the Brazilian-

⁹¹ In this case China and Russia – as established great powers with UN Security Council seats have joined France and the UK in rebuffing Brazil’s attempts at Security Council Membership (Jones: 2014, 60). This presents an opportunity for the United States to support Brazil and move towards a genuine alliance.

⁹² Harris: 2009, 21-22. Note that this treaty is now in effect, but the refusal of Argentina and Brazil to participate means it impacts only a third of the South American economy.

⁹³ Ibid., 23. From 2000 to 2009 the value (in US dollars) of bilateral trade between China and Brazil quadrupled, and China is currently Brazil’s largest trading partner.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 24, quoting then Brazilian President Lula.

Chinese “special relationship” to a genuine alliance. The long-term consequences of such an alliance to the stability of the American led international system are certain to be negative, and could easily lead to increased disequilibrium and a push for change.

Russia

To discuss Russia as a member of the rising BRIC states appears somewhat disingenuous, considering that Russia today is significantly weaker in military and economic terms than the Soviet Union was during the Cold War.⁹⁵ Since the 1980s Russia has lost thousands of miles of territory and millions of its citizens to newly created autonomous states along its western frontier. Its economy has gone from being the world’s second largest to the eighth, surpassed in recent decades by China, Japan, The United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Brazil.⁹⁶ Over the same period Russia’s military and political superiority in Eastern Europe and East Asia has been diminished by the expansion of the European Union and NATO and the rise of Chinese economic and military power.⁹⁷

Though not as strong as the Soviet Union was three decades ago, Russia is significantly more powerful than it was in the wake of the disastrous collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. President Vladimir Putin may be widely reviled in the west, but his continuing domestic popularity suggests that Russians, at least, believe that he has

⁹⁵ In 1980 the total GNP of the USSR was 3.41 trillion (Kennedy: 1987, 436, adjusted for inflation). Today Russia’s GNP is 1.99 trillion (The CIA World Factbook: 2014).

⁹⁶ The CIA World Factbook: 2014.

⁹⁷ Putin is particularly opposed to the expansion of NATO, which he sees as a violation of an unwritten agreement the alliance made with Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Shiffrin: 2014). Putin has also pushed to improve relations with China, and in November of 2014 both nations agreed to a massive energy deal that creates new economic and political ties between the two powers (Johnson: 2014a).

improved their standing in the world.⁹⁸ Despite this, Russia remains haunted by many of the same weaknesses that crippled the Soviet Union, including high-level corruption, an economy overly reliant on oil and gas, and an aggressive foreign policy agenda that wins few friends abroad. It also faces several new threats, including a dangerous demographic problem brought on by rampant alcoholism and a lack of social cohesion.⁹⁹

Yet Russia remains a great power in its own right. It retains the largest land army in Europe, backed by a significant air force and navy, and controls most of Europe's supply of oil and gas, which it has used as a political tool more than once.¹⁰⁰ It has a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, which it has consistently used to frustrate US-backed initiatives. And of course, Russia possesses the world's second largest nuclear arsenal.¹⁰¹ Russia is not a rising power on the order of India or China; indeed it may soon prove to be a declining one. Nevertheless, as long as Russia retains the military advantages outlined above it will remain an important factor in world politics.

When the Soviet Union collapsed it appeared for a time that Russia might finally fully integrate with the west and end decades of tension and conflict. Unfortunately, relations between Russia and the west are now at their worst since the end of the Cold War.¹⁰² President Putin's backing of separatist movements in Georgia and Ukraine has

⁹⁸ According to the Levada Center (an independent Russian polling organization) Putin's approval ratings are at 85%, double Obama's approval rating of only 44% as of November of 2014.

⁹⁹ Gessen: 2014. In the decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia suffered the worst ever demographic collapse in an industrialized country outside of wartime, and the total population declined by 800,000 a year.

¹⁰⁰ Francis: 2014. Russia's threat to withhold gas from Ukraine over the course of the Ukrainian crisis is the latest attempt by Russia to use its fuel supply as a weapon against western sanctions and eastern European independence movements.

¹⁰¹ Gessen: 2014.

¹⁰² Ibid.

sparked international condemnation, as has his ongoing support of Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime in Syria. Western commentators have often misread these moves as irrational and outdated mistakes by an out of touch Putin.¹⁰³ They are not. Putin is a shrewd political operator responding to the desires of the Russian people for a new Russian empire and resisting what he sees as the dangerous expansion of the west into Eastern Europe.¹⁰⁴ He managed to prevent a western military response to Assad's use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War, preserving Assad's regime and making President Obama appear weak and indecisive in the process.

Putin's actions in Ukraine have had a higher cost, resulting in international condemnation and western economic sanctions. Despite sanctions, Russia successfully annexed Crimea and highlighted deep divisions between the United States and some of its European allies in the process.¹⁰⁵ Russia can be expected to continue aggressively resisting the spread of NATO and EU membership in Eastern Europe as long as it has the strength to do so. Putin will likely continue the strategy he has deployed in Georgia and Ukraine – using the plight of Russian speaking minorities to legitimize (at least to his own people) Russian military intervention in neighboring regions.

These acts violate two fundamental tenants of the international system: the right of every nation to self-determination and the prohibition against the use of force in

¹⁰³ See Jacobs: 2014 for an example of this trend.

¹⁰⁴ Putin's annexation of Crimea was extremely popular domestically, as is his resistance to western pressure over the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Perhaps most troubling of all, many Russians now have a favorable opinion of Stalin, and Putin regularly references him in patriotic speeches (Gessen: 2014).

¹⁰⁵ Johnson: 2014b. European countries that rely on Russian oil imports such as Germany have been resistant to American pushes for wider sanctions, and France appears to be following through with its promised sale of two advanced warships to Russia despite American pressure not to.

resolving geopolitical conflicts.¹⁰⁶ By doing so Russia implicitly challenges the hegemonic position of the United States, creating the potential for a push for systemic change of the leadership structure of the international system. Russia has already attempted systemic change throughout the Cold War, and though its potential was greater then, it was ultimately unsuccessful.¹⁰⁷ The difference is that during the Cold War the Soviet Union was largely on its own, and it and its allies were forced to operate outside the bounds of the international system. Now Russia is a more integrated part of the international community and, with the rise of the other BRIC nations, is no longer alone in challenging the status quo.¹⁰⁸

Still, Russia is not the force it was thirty years ago, and its economy and social order are in poor shape, with little hope for improvement. The weakness of the Russian economy is such that western sanctions over Ukraine combined with the November OPEC decision not to reduce oil production (and prevent the recent slide in global oil and gas prices) could end up costing Russia over 130 billion dollars a year, roughly seven percent of its entire GDP.¹⁰⁹ It is entirely possible that Russia is entering a long decline, and its economic success in the 2000s was an anomaly driven by high global oil prices and little else. Even if this is the case, though, Russia will remain an important and potentially destabilizing force in world politics.

¹⁰⁶ This is hardly a new phenomenon, both tenants have been repeatedly violated in recent decades, and the list of transgressors includes the United States. Russia's actions are unique, however, because of their location (other than the Balkan crisis Europe has not seen borders remade by force since the end of the Second World War) and the seeming inability of the international community to respond in a unified manner.

¹⁰⁷ Gilpin analyzed this struggle in systemic terms, and at the time came to the conclusion that the USSR might eventually triumph (Gilpin: 1981, 231-244).

¹⁰⁸ Though the BRIC nations are hardly united in their objectives or efforts. See Jones: 2014, 57-80 for an analysis of this disunity.

¹⁰⁹ Soldatkin: 2014.

Empires in decline can cause more instability to the international system than ascendant ones; history is full of examples of states that have gone to war because they fear they will lose the ability to do so in the future.¹¹⁰ A Russia with an economy and society in crisis that retains a sizable military and a strong authoritarian leader could prove dangerous indeed. Russia's military strength and aggressive foreign policy will distract the United States, forcing it to expand military assets and political capital reacting to Putin's moves instead of investing them in other system maintenance tasks. This has the potential to dilute American resources to the point of overstretch by raising the costs of preserving the international system at a moment when the American people have grown weary of paying for what they see as unnecessary foreign engagement. Even if Russia does not succeed in reestablishing any form of empire it has the potential to contribute to the decline of the United States, tying up resources and constraining American action, allowing less over-committed great powers to make gains relative to the United States.¹¹¹ Finally, whether it rises or falls, Russia will retain over 8,000 nuclear warheads in its arsenal, the majority of which remain aimed at the west.¹¹² This, if nothing else, will keep Russia in the great power camp for the foreseeable future.

¹¹⁰ Historical examples of this phenomenon include the German decision to precipitate the First World War (see Copeland: 2009), Japan's attack on the United States in 1941 in response to crippling US sanctions, and (if we are to believe Thucydides) the Spartan decision to go to war with Athens in the Peloponnesian War.

¹¹¹ Germany did much the same to Great Britain at the turn of the 20th century, demonstrating that a challenger does not need succeed in gaining power itself in order to force systemic change.

¹¹² From The Nuclear Threat Initiative website: 2014.

India

When Prime Minister Modi of India visited the United States for the first time in 2014 he received a rock star reception from the Indian-American population. At Madison Square Garden Modi spoke before a crowd of 18,000 Indian-Americans and promised them a future in which India was strong, independent, and free from corruption, poverty, and pollution.¹¹³ He has a lot of work to do. There were 80 million homeless Indians as of a 2011 census, and although India has the world's 10th largest economy, it has the 142nd largest GDP per capita.¹¹⁴ As Indian-American academic Fareed Zakaria wrote in 2008, "The country might have several Silicon Valleys, but it also has three Nigerias within it... more than 300 million people living on less than a dollar a day."¹¹⁵ In addition to these economic woes, India is plagued by religious and regional strife, health issues related to environmental degradation and pollution, and a difficult geographic position with hostile Pakistan to the west and a China that is growing at an even faster pace than India to the north.

Despite all this, India remains the largest democracy in the world, with an economy that has grown at an impressive seven percent over much of the past two decades (although this has slowed significantly in the past two years).¹¹⁶ Assuming this drop in growth is likely a short-term phenomenon (as early 2014 economic data suggests it is), India can be expected to become the world's third largest economy by around

¹¹³ Fish: 2014

¹¹⁴ Ibid. Indian GDP per capita is from 2013 IMF statistics and is nominal (not adjusted for purchasing power parity).

¹¹⁵ Zakaria: 2008, 133.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 130.

2040.¹¹⁷ This growth will undoubtedly be helped by India's demographic strength; India's population continues to grow at a rapid rate, meaning it will continue to possess a robust workforce well into the future, something that China, Russia, Japan, and much of Europe will have to struggle with in the decades to come.¹¹⁸ Demographic trends have important implications for future economic growth, and India's current normal growth rate of 1.25 percent is substantially larger than the US rate of .77 percent and the Chinese rate of .44 percent.¹¹⁹ If this trend continues India is set to become the most populous nation on earth by sometime around 2028, furthering its potential as a great power.

When Paul Kennedy analyzed what he saw as the potential challengers to American hegemony in the 1980s, he devoted no space to India's potential.¹²⁰ At the time, India's economy had not yet entered its two-decade growth spurt, and India's primary foreign policy objective was nonalignment: an attempt to stay out of the global struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States. This period has ended. At the 2008 Doha round of WTO negotiations, India single-handedly brought the negotiations to a standstill after the European Union and United States failed to agree to continuing Indian agricultural subsidies, the first time a developing country successfully halted a free trade agreement it saw as unbalanced.¹²¹ India refused to lift its veto of planned WTO reforms until the United States agreed to allow the continuation of Indian food

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 132.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 132.

¹¹⁹ The CIA World Factbook: 2014.

¹²⁰ Kennedy: 1987, 438-535.

¹²¹ Jones: 2014, 105.

stockpiling practices, a minor change to WTO rules that nevertheless demonstrates India's growing weight in that body's deliberations.¹²²

India also possesses a tool that China and Russia do not – significant soft power. Soft power is the ability of one state to influence another without the use or threat of force, an important capability in an age where the international community is quick to condemn the overt use of force by one state against another. The United States has tremendous reserves of soft power, from the global reach of Hollywood to the draw of liberal democracy to the benefits it receives from securing the world's trade lanes.¹²³ China, by contrast, possesses relatively little soft power, and Russia wields none at all.¹²⁴ India does have significant soft power, and though it is nowhere near equal that of the United States, it is growing at a rapid clip. Bollywood has a fraction of Hollywood's budget, but it produces almost double the number of movies and they are now watched across Asia, and increasingly in other parts of the world as well.¹²⁵ Indian cuisine is world renown, and Indian architectural and fashion styles are growing in popularity.¹²⁶ Finally, although India's government is flawed; it has remained a relatively stable and representative voice for India's hundreds of diverse ethnic and religious groups. These factors matter, indeed they may prove more important than traditional indices of state power such as navel tonnage and army size.

¹²² Miles: 2014.

¹²³ See Posen: 2003 for an analysis of the costs and benefits of the later.

¹²⁴ Note that both China and Brazil are attempting to change this. Brazil's hosting of the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics can be seen as an attempt to acquire soft power, and China has several initiatives that I will discuss below. Only Russia appears resigned to losing the "soft power race."

¹²⁵ Zakaria: 2008, 138.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 139.

Furthermore, India is making great strides in research and development, a vital investment for future growth. A very tangible expression of these efforts was the recent successful Indian mission to Mars. In September of 2014 India succeeded in sending a satellite into orbit around Mars on its very first attempt – a feat that few nations have achieved.¹²⁷ Furthermore, it did so at a cost of roughly one tenth that of an equivalent American version.¹²⁸ India has far fewer resources than the United States, but at times this has spurred creative development and greater efficiency. In the end, India’s ability to innovate might pose a greater threat to continued American leadership than a strategic rivalry between the two nations.

India’s place in the world is uncertain, its global ambitions largely undefined. India has not yet converted its economic potential or soft power into significant political objectives, beyond its non-alignment past. This policy served India well while it was weak, but if India is to mature into a genuine great power it can no longer remain neutral from the struggles of other great powers. The United States too maintained an aloof posture for much of its early history, and only became a great power decades after it was already the world’s largest economic power. India, however, is unlikely to have this luxury. Surrounded by potential threats on all sides, India will soon be forced to clearly articulate its foreign policy objectives. Critically, India will have to decide whether it wants to balance China’s rise by allying with the United States or bandwagon with China and attempt to force systemic change within the international system. Either way, India’s traditional decision to remain neutral will become less and less of an option.

¹²⁷ Amos: 2014.

¹²⁸ Ibid. The total cost of the project was 74 million US dollars.

China

Of all the rising powers, there is only one that has truly captured academic and public attention. Only one has generated a new wave of publications with sensationalist titles such as *A Contest For Supremacy*, *Still Ours to Lead*, and, *The Post-American World*.¹²⁹ Brazil and India pose economic and soft power challenges to the American-led system. Russia is a political and military competitor with a hefty nuclear arsenal and structural power in the form of a UN Security Council seat. But only China has the medium-term potential to compete with the United States on all of the above fronts.¹³⁰ Economically, China has the world's second largest economy, growing at a rate that leads many scholars to predict that it will overtake the American economy in absolute size sometime between the 2020s and 2040s.¹³¹ Structurally, China enjoys a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and is impatiently pushing for more of a voice in economic institutions such as the IMF, and is creating competing institutions when its efforts are rebuffed.¹³² Militarily, China might lack a significant "blue water" or expeditionary-capable navy, but it is rapidly developing a force that could potentially deny the United

¹²⁹ See Friedberg: 2011, Jones: 2014, and Zakaria: 2008 respectively.

¹³⁰ By medium-term I mean the period of time from the next decade and a half to half a century from now. In the short-term (less than a decade and a half) even China will be unlikely to significantly challenge the United States over anything other than economic issues, and the long-term (over a half century from now) is likely to be so volatile as to make any sort of speculation next to useless.

¹³¹ Friedberg: 2011, 32. The much-publicized 2003 Goldman Sachs study suggested 2041 would be the big year, economist Albert Keidel uses 2035 as the crossover point, and, in response to the global financial crisis of 2008 Goldman Sachs revised its estimate to 2027.

¹³² China's challenge to the IMF's quota voting system has been particularly contentious. The United States has actually backed China's push for greater voting power at the IMF (since 2010), but has been stymied by European nations that face the prospect of losing voting seats. See Jones: 2014 104-108 for an overview of this debate.

States access to much of the western Pacific.¹³³ Furthermore, China currently possesses land force far larger than its chief regional rivals such as India, Japan, and South Korea, and a sizable nuclear force of roughly 194 operational warheads.¹³⁴

Finally, China has thus far demonstrated that sustained economic growth is possible without political liberalization, in the process overturning the comforting western assumption that in the modern world, economic prosperity is tied to democratization. By doing so, China has the potential to become what many in the west already fear. As an inflammatory article in *Foreign Affairs* puts it, “Never mind notions of a responsible stakeholder; China has become a revolutionary power.”¹³⁵

Assessing the accuracy of such predictions is difficult to say the least, most notably because of the opaqueness of the Chinese political system. For decades China has followed reformer and political leader Deng Xiaoping's advice to “Hide brightness, cherish obscurity” by downplaying China’s rise and acting with restraint on the international stage.¹³⁶ By and large this policy has been successful, allowing China to forge essential economic ties to traditional adversaries in the region such as Japan, South Korea, and the United States that might otherwise have combined to contain it.¹³⁷ There are, however, increasing signs that China’s era of self-imposed restraint is drawing to a close.

¹³³ For an analysis of American blue water supremacy and some of its vulnerabilities to a well-equipped littoral defense force see Posen: 2003. Note that this analysis does not take into account the recent Chinese anti-ship ballistic missile program, which, if successful, could fundamentally alter the navel balance of power in the Pacific. See Cropsey: 2010 for an overview of this program and some of the potential implications of its success.

¹³⁴ From The Nuclear Threat Initiative website: 2014.

¹³⁵ Economy: 2010.

¹³⁶ Xiaoping, quoted in Economy: 2010.

¹³⁷ Friedberg: 2011, 132.

Between 2001 and 2007 Chinese trade with Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America increased 600 percent, driven by a push for the natural resources China needs to continue to grow.¹³⁸ In 2009 in response to the global financial crisis the Chinese central-bank governor suggested that it was time to move away from the dollar as the world's reserve currency.¹³⁹ More troublingly, China has recently taken provocative steps over territory that is contested with Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan, the latter two of which have US security commitments, raising the risks of an accidental clash that could spiral into a conflict nobody desires.¹⁴⁰

These actions all suggest that China is beginning to act more assertively on the world stage, the key question is whether this newfound activism will take place within the confines of the existing international system or as a revolutionary attempt to overthrow it. There is no academic consensus on this question, perhaps because the Chinese themselves are not quite sure what to do with their newfound power. A recent Brookings institute publication divides Chinese strategists into five camps: "Nativists" who act as the Chinese equivalent to American isolationists, those that focus on "Asia first" and believe China should focus on becoming the preeminent power in Asia, those that believe China should remain tied to its "global South" nonalignment roots as the leader of the developing countries, "selective multilateralists" who push for greater economic ties to the rest of the world, and, most importantly, the Chinese realists, with

¹³⁸ Economy: 2010.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Steinberg and O'Hanlon: 2014. The Chinese decision to establish an Air Defense Identification Zone over much of the East China Sea (most notably the Senkaku islands, which are disputed between Japan and China) and significantly increased tension in that region. See Welch: 2013.

their emphasis on sovereignty and great power relations.¹⁴¹ The consensus among China watchers is that the realists have the most power, but all five groups continue to articulate often-contradictory views on what China's future role should be.

Whatever path Beijing decides to take will be fraught with difficulties. The "Chinese model" of economic liberalism and political authoritarianism can only reasonably be expected to hold together as long as Chinese economic growth remains high.¹⁴² If growth slows the Chinese government can expect to face unrest that makes current widespread protests seem mild in comparison. This should be deeply troubling for the Chinese leadership, since maintaining high growth rates will be difficult in the coming decades. This is due to the "middle income trap," the situation in which a vastly growing economy is forced to make a transition to high-end manufacturing as rising incomes decrease the supply of cheap labor.¹⁴³ This transition has traditionally slowed or even stalled growth, and in China's case this effect could be confounded by a demographic problem resulting from China's "one child" laws.¹⁴⁴

Even if China can somehow avert these economic and domestic woes it faces an extremely difficult geostrategic situation. Despite all of China's recent economic foreign investments it has few friends and many potential rivals. To the southwest is India, to the north, Russia, to the northeast, the economic powerhouses of South Korea and Japan, backed by American security guarantees and a significant American troop presence, to the southeast Australia, Indonesia, and New Zealand. Finally, there is Taiwan, the island whose continued independence from the mainland has proved a

¹⁴¹ Jones: 2014, 163-164.

¹⁴² Ibid., 167.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴⁴ Friedberg: 2011, 243.

consistent source of embarrassment to the Chinese government, but who's security is guaranteed by the United States.¹⁴⁵ If China continues to assert itself it risks driving these countries even closer to the United States, but if it does nothing it remains complacent in the status quo. China faces an additional, even greater check to potential expansion. In order to fuel its growth China needs to import an enormous quantity of energy and food, and nearly all of it passes through the straits of Hormuz and Malacca.¹⁴⁶ The United States possesses the only navy in the world capable of keeping these straits open, and would face little military trouble in closing them, effectively strangling China in the process. It is an endless source of insecurity for a state in which trade makes up seventy percent of its economy that the security of this trade depends on the warships of its greatest strategic rival.

The rise of China has been swift, impressive, and deeply disconcerting to many in the west. It will almost certainly soon become the world's largest economy, only fitting considering it is home to 1.36 billion people.¹⁴⁷ As China continues to grow economically it will inevitably attempt to increase its political weight in the international system. If it does so within the confines of the current international system China has the opportunity to gradually expand its influence in the world while avoiding a rebalancing alliance led by the United States. If, however, the rise of China is swift or forceful enough to

¹⁴⁵ The actual commitment of the United States to defend Taiwan has been consistently questioned by some Chinese officials. One famously remarked that the United States would have to decide if it was really willing to "sacrifice Los Angeles to protect Taiwan" (Freidberg: 2011, 97). A Chinese misinterpretation of American willingness to come to Taiwan's defense in the event of a Chinese military attack is without question one of the most likely potential causes of a future great power conflict.

¹⁴⁶ Jones: 2014, 168.

¹⁴⁷ The CIA World Factbook: 2014.

destabilize the region, it has the potential to result in new arms races, regional conflict, or, at worst, hegemonic war with the United States.

The Others

Of course the BRIC nations and existing great powers are not the only states that will have an important impact on the long-term stability of the international system. First and foremost are the other rising powers, the countries whose growth is significant but not as spectacular as that of Brazil, India, and China. The most important members of this group include South Korea, Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴⁸ Of these, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are firm allies of the United States, though in the case of Turkey increasing autocratic tendencies within the ruling AKP party may damage this alliance.¹⁴⁹ Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa are not American allies, but they are not opposed to any key American interests either. Critically, all six rising middle powers are keenly aware that they depend on the open trade and international rule of law that the international system provides to continue their growth. They might push for interaction change in the guise of minor reforms of the system, but they lack the inclination or capability to attempt systemic change.

Another influential grouping of states is the European Union; the twenty-eight European states that together constitute the world's largest trading block.¹⁵⁰ In the aftermath of the Cold War there was some speculation that the EU might grow into a

¹⁴⁸ Jones: 2014, 51. Jones refers to these countries as members of the “trillionars club” (the nations whose GDP tops a trillion US dollars). In addition to the BRIC nations and the six mentioned above, this group includes Japan, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, Australia, Spain, and Switzerland.

¹⁴⁹ Karaveli: 2014.

¹⁵⁰ Jones: 2014, 48.

genuine “super state” with the economic and political muscle to challenge the United States for control of the international system.¹⁵¹ In fact the opposite has taken place, and in recent years the European Union has moved toward less, not more, unity. Unless a dramatic change occurs in the next few decades it seems unlikely to expect that the European Union will morph into anything more than an economic union. Of the EU’s member states, only three, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, are strategically significant. As has already been explored, the UK and France are both firmly status quo powers; they are allies of the United States and the current international system largely suits their own interests. A somewhat more uncertain case, Germany possesses Europe’s largest economy and a sizable military.¹⁵² Still, Germany is constrained by its membership in the EU and its own bloody history. As long as those factors continue Germany is unlikely to attempt to challenge the status quo or seek to become a great power in its own right.

Finally, there is Japan, the state that was once predicted to challenge American hegemony in the 21st century.¹⁵³ In the 1980s Japan’s then extraordinary economic growth convinced some that it would be the next leader of the international system by virtue of its economic potential alone. Instead, Japan soon entered a decade and a half of stagnated growth and recession that it is only now beginning to pull out of. These efforts will most likely be harmed by Japan’s own impending demographic problem, which is far worse than that facing any other state today.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Japan remains an important great power in its own right, albeit one without nuclear weapons or offensive military

¹⁵¹ Kennedy: 1987, 471-488.

¹⁵² Jones: 2014, 48.

¹⁵³ Kennedy: 1987, 458-471.

¹⁵⁴ Harney: 2013. Japan’s current growth rate is negative .13 percent.

capabilities. Japan is a vital United States ally, particularly in the event of a Sino-American confrontation. If the United States loses its credibility in Asia due to a rise in Chinese power it might spark a resurgent militarism within Japan. Otherwise, Japan too is unlikely to seek to disturb the status quo.

Conclusion

It is easy to misread the rise of new powers. Taken individually, none of the BRIC nations, not even China, can challenge the supremacy of the United States. Nor do they necessarily want to force a confrontation with the United States; even China recognizes the crucial role the United States plays in maintaining the international stability that allows it its unprecedented growth.¹⁵⁵ The rise of the new great powers matters regardless, because by their very existence they raise the cost of system maintenance for the United States. The United States currently maintains roughly 66,000 troops in Europe, the vast majority of whom serve as NATO guards against renewed Russian nationalism.¹⁵⁶ There are 40,000 troops in Japan, and an additional 35,000 in South Korea.¹⁵⁷ Although these personnel fulfill multiple roles in East Asia (the most important of which is the prevention of renewed hostilities between North and South Korea), they also serve as a deterrent to Chinese military intervention in Taiwan and prevent an arms race in the region. These deployments – and the ten carrier battle groups that support

¹⁵⁵ Jones: 2014, 21. To quote an unnamed Brazilian politician in 2007, “We don’t want a collapse of American leadership. We want a long, slow soft landing for American dominance.”

¹⁵⁶ Ferguson: 2004, 16.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 17.

them – explain much of why the United States contributes roughly 45 percent of global military spending.¹⁵⁸

The economic competition posed by the BRIC nations further undermines the ability of the United States to maintain the status quo. India might not directly challenge American hegemony, but the growth of its technological and service sectors put pressure on their American equivalents, indirectly weakening the economic foundations of American hegemony. The same can be said of China and Brazil. By continued growth alone the BRIC nations contribute to disequilibrium by raising the costs of maintaining the status quo and altering the great power balance. If these trends continue the United States will be faced with the same crisis that has afflicted every historical hegemon; it will no longer be able to maintain the system it created.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Jones: 2014, 23.

¹⁵⁹ For a modern example of this phenomenon one need only look to the British example. In 1850 the British Empire was arguably at the height of its global reach and power, but the rise of economic competitors (primarily Russia and the United States) was weakening the foundations of its strategic and economic supremacy (see Gilpin: 1981, 159-168). Today the United Kingdom is in the process of constructing two new carriers that will soon become the flagships of the Royal Navy. Unfortunately for the British, they currently lack the aircraft to man these carriers, and to make up the shortfall they intend to allow the United States Marines to operate aircraft off of these carriers. Imagine the reaction of a British naval officer in 1850 to the suggestion that in little over a century and a half Americans would man the flagships of the Royal Navy. It is shortsighted to believe that economic competition will not one day lead to strategic domination.

IV The Constraints to Continued American Leadership

The Pressure for Change

The economic and political growth of the BRIC states has pushed the international system towards disequilibrium, creating a growing imbalance between the costs of system maintenance and the ability of the United States to continue paying. If the United States is able to accommodate the more reasonable aspirations of the rising powers – such as institutional recognition in the form of greater voice in the IMF and permanent seats on the UN Security Council – it has the potential to co-opt them into supporting the international status quo. This will allow for some interaction and systemic change without damaging the underlying norms and characteristics of the international system or resulting in a direct challenge to American authority. The alternative could be the hegemonic conflict that has historically accompanied systemic change.¹⁶⁰

In this section I analyze the pressures for change throughout the international system and outline some of the steps the United States could take to mitigate the risks of major systemic and systems change. In a 2010 study on the future of American power Joseph Nye likened the distribution of power in the international system to a game of chess played on three chessboards representing military competition, economic rivalry,

¹⁶⁰ Gilpin: 1971, 11. The exception to this historical trend was the systemic change resulting from the decline of Great Britain and the rise of the United States. In that case (after some, initial conflict), Great Britain was able to accommodate the United States, yielding its influence in the western hemisphere, thereby preventing conflict between the two powers. Even so, the rise of alternative great powers (Germany and later Japan) that Great Britain was not willing to accommodate resulted in two hegemonic wars, demonstrating that conflict need not develop between the preeminent rising power and the reigning power for hegemonic war to ensue or the status quo power to fall.

and “transnational relations” respectively.¹⁶¹ Nye’s model is a useful way to conceptualize the distribution of power, and I adopt it here as a way to organize change in the international system. This, however, necessitates the addition of a new dimension of “level of change” to Nye’s chess game.

The three-dimensional game of chess is being played for vastly different stakes. On the bottom level, the stakes are interaction change, involving institutional representation, relatively minor shifts in economic potential, and change in military capabilities that do not fundamentally alter the hierarchy of power in the international system. The second level deals with systemic change. Here the stakes are much higher, involving shifts to the military balance of power, extensive change of the economic potential of the great powers, and the transformation of global perception and institutional recognition of various states. The final level involves systems change, which entails change to which entities are “allowed” to play on each board. Though great powers currently dominate the military chessboard, they seem to be losing ground to nuclear- armed middle powers, non-states actors such as trans-national drug organizations, and terrorist groups. Similarly, some have argued that private entities (corporations) and regional blocks (such as the European Union) are challenging the state’s control over the economic board.¹⁶² Finally, a systems shift is already underway on the transnational relations board, where actors as diverse as states, corporations, NGOs, terrorists, and filmmakers vie for international recognition.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Nye: 2010. Note Nye’s definition of transnational relations is roughly analogous to my use of structural power.

¹⁶² Amitav makes a particularly strong case for the growing supremacy of regional blocks over nation-states in the economic sphere (Amitav: 2014).

¹⁶³ Ibid.

With this matrix as a guide, I break the international system into four geographic regions and study the potentials and consequences of change at each level and across each spectrum of power. The regions are the Western Hemisphere, European subcontinent, Asia, and Africa and the Middle East. The first three regions each contain one or more BRIC states that have the potential to instigate change of some form.¹⁶⁴ The fourth region – Africa and the Middle East – currently has no potential great power. Nevertheless, there are moves towards systems changes that are taking place in the region that have an impact on the equilibrium and structure of the international system. With this in mind, I turn to an analysis of the potentials for change in the coming decades and how the United States might reasonably respond to prevent further disequilibrium.

The Western Hemisphere

Long before the United States rose to great power – let alone superpower – status it dominated the Western Hemisphere. As early as the 1848 end of the Mexican-American War the United States had become the preeminent local power in the western hemisphere. A half-century later the Spanish-American War demonstrated the United States' capacity and willingness to enforce its claim to regional hegemony.¹⁶⁵ For the last century the United States has continued as the sole economic, military, and political giant in the western hemisphere, and has reaped the rewards of having a secure and stable geographic position within a vast network of relatively open markets.¹⁶⁶ On the military

¹⁶⁴ Brazil in the Western Hemisphere, Russia in Europe, and India and China in Asia.

¹⁶⁵ Hannigan: 2003.

¹⁶⁶ This position has come at the cost of alienating much of Latin America, something the United States will have to work hard to overcome if it wishes to prevent systemic challenge in its own backyard. The author of this article makes a compelling case that the United States has damaged

level this situation is unlikely to change anytime soon, but the economic and structural rise of Brazil and the continuing recognition among Latin American countries of past injustices threatens local stability.¹⁶⁷ If the United States can adapt to some of the pressing interaction changes desired by its Southern neighbors it can hope to stave off disequilibrium in the region. If not, American power in the Americas might face its first significant challenge in over a century.

On an economic level, the dominance of the United States over the western hemisphere has waned for decades. In 2011 the GDP of Latin America grew at an average of 5.6 percent compared to 1.6 percent growth for the United States.¹⁶⁸ Though much of this growth has been driven by the rise of Brazil the region overall is significantly wealthier than it was even a decade ago.¹⁶⁹ The United States will likely remain the wealthiest nation in the western hemisphere for the foreseeable future, and even the more well-off Latin American states lack the infrastructure, innovation, and resources at the disposal of the United States. Nor is a European Union style economic union in Latin America that could pool the regions resources and genuinely challenge the United States likely. The smaller Latin American states are as leery of Brazil as they are

relations with its Southern neighbors in its enthusiastic enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine. These views now appear prescient, witness the hostility of Bolivia, Venezuela, and Cuba to centuries of American economic and at times physical imperialism (Unknown Author: 1924).

¹⁶⁷ Latin Americans do not forget that “for much of the twentieth century, there was a disconnect between Washington's lofty rhetoric of democracy and regional harmony and its demonstrated willingness to jettison these principles when its economic or geopolitical interests were at stake” (Crandall: 2011). Reestablishing the legitimacy of a democratic liberal world order must be a priority for the United States if it wishes to prevent a real push for systemic challenge within the western hemisphere.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. Between 2002 and 2008 40 million Latin Americans were lifted out of poverty, a figure that stands at odds with the average American perception of a violence torn impoverished south.

of the United States. As one Latin American diplomat recently remarked, “the new imperialists have arrived, and they speak Portuguese.”¹⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the economic growth of Latin America is vital because of its implications for change on an institutional or structural level. For decades Latin American countries have been at the mercy of the IMF, World Bank, and other international organizations they had little control over. On a regional level the United States has dominated the Organization of American States (OAS), often using it as a means to coerce its weaker neighbors.¹⁷¹ This period is nearing its end. Brazil and other Latin American countries are currently actively seeking greater voting rights in the IMF, and Brazil has pursued a full seat on an expanded UN Security Council for decades.¹⁷² Furthermore, Brazil sponsors the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), a regional forum that excludes the United States and that some Latin American countries hope could one day evolve into a genuine alternative to the OAS.¹⁷³

If the United States wishes to avoid a push for systemic change in Latin America it must acknowledge that it can no longer dominate the Western Hemisphere as it once did. Systemic change has already occurred on the economic level, and the only way to prevent it spilling over into the structural and eventually military spheres is to accept that some interaction change in this area is both inevitable and beneficial, both to Latin America and to the overall stability of the international system. The United States must accept the new influence of the stronger Latin American countries and move towards a more inclusive OAS to avoid pushing states into competing regional forums such as

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, quoting an unnamed diplomat.

¹⁷¹ Hannigan: 2003, 108.

¹⁷² Sabatini: 2012.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

UNASUR. Furthermore, the United States should support the region's push for more of a say in the IMF, WTO, and World Bank, even if some quota gains for Latin America must come at the expense of the voting power of the United States' traditional allies in Europe.¹⁷⁴ Indeed the United State should go a step further, and actively support Brazil's bid for a seat on the UN Security Council. In addition to its primary benefit of pulling Brazil further into the current international system, this has the potential to drive a wedge between the BRIC states that already have a seat on the Security Council and those that are actively seeking one.¹⁷⁵

In short, the United States should do everything in its power to demonstrate that it takes the economic and political rise of Latin America seriously, and that it is genuinely committed to ensuring that the Latin American nations receive a fair representation in the economic and, eventually, security institutions that are the hallmark of power in the modern international system. If it can do so effectively it has the opportunity to convert a potential source of insecurity into one of strength. If Latin America continues its economic growth while further integrating into the international system it can become a major source of stability, much as Western Europe has for the last sixty years.¹⁷⁶ This stability will come at the price of significant interaction change that will, at times,

¹⁷⁴ Jones: 2014, 58-59.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 60. Security Council reform is an incredibly tricky prospect, especially considering that any current member can block the addition of new seats. This being said, even the act of supporting Brazil (and, as will be explored later) India's push for permanent seats can only boost relations with those two states.

¹⁷⁶ See Ikenberry: 2011b for a good (though in my opinion overly-optimistic) argument for this stabilizing factor.

inconvenience the United States and its allies over the short term.¹⁷⁷ Such inconveniences are trivial, however, compared to the alternative.

If the United States resists change on all levels it risks uniting the states that desire change into one coalition that, once it gains momentum, will not stop until it has achieved systemic change and fundamentally altered the international system. China recently displaced the United States as Brazil's leading trading partner, and is heavily invested in the wider region.¹⁷⁸ Though this represents an economic interaction change it is easy to envision scenarios in which these bonds harden into political and eventually military alliances. The last time the United States faced a systemic challenge to its hegemonic position during the Cold War it was strong enough (and Latin America was weak enough) that it could rely on hard power to crush almost all resistance in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁷⁹ If the push for systemic change once again becomes great enough, the United States may discover at the eleventh hour that this approach is no longer sufficient.

Europe

The sustained "European peace" of the last seventy years has been one of the greatest successes of the modern international system.¹⁸⁰ From the end of the Second

¹⁷⁷ It is likely, for instance, that a more vocal Latin America would demand reform to regional free trade agreements at the expense of American industries.

¹⁷⁸ Sabatini: 2012.

¹⁷⁹ Even then, American misuse of hard power led to many of the Latin American coalitions that are currently actively seeking to push the United States out of Latin America, most significantly the ALBA alliance of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Cuba. See Hannigan: 2003.

¹⁸⁰ Here "European peace" refers to an absence of great power conflict, not violence. The wars in the Balkans, the Russian suppression of democratic movements in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and tragically common acts of terrorism throughout Europe demonstrate that even a region at

World War to the breakup of the Soviet Union western Europe has transformed itself from a wasteland of ruined, squabbling states to a relatively unified whole. This union has provided a continual source of stability, supporting international development through IMF and World Bank loans, enforcing the norms of the international system through institutions such as the International Criminal Court, and contributing to global security through NATO participation and bilateral security agreements with the United States.¹⁸¹ Throughout Europe there was wave of optimism after the Cold War ended that this system could spread throughout the former Soviet Union, until all of Europe had become one unified whole.¹⁸²

Sadly, that dream has failed to materialize, and today a unified Europe free of security concerns appears still far off. The revitalization of Russia, the failure of the European Union to take unified action in response, the continued reliance of the European states on American deterrence for their defense, and the recent Eurozone crisis all point to a resurgence of change and conflict in Europe. Furthermore, declining European birth rates, combined with a steady flow of immigrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa has upset the ethnic balances of Europe, leading to domestic upheaval as immigrants attempt to find a place in what were once more homogeneous societies and a nationalist backlash from Europeans afraid of diluting their

peace must suffer an underlying level of violence. Still, compared to the hegemonic struggles of the 18th and 20th centuries these conflicts were relatively minor affairs.

¹⁸¹ That these institutions have rarely measured up to their ideals matters less than the fact that by their very existence they have contributed to the structure and stability of the international system.

¹⁸² Even then, this optimism was hardly universal. See particularly Mearsheimer: 1990.

distinctive cultures.¹⁸³ If Europe cannot weather this storm it risks returning to the insecure battleground it took two world wars to crawl out of. Even if it finds a way forward, demographic and economic trends suggest that overtime Europe will steadily lose its ability to contribute to equilibrium and influence world affairs.

The most immediate threat facing Europe is the resurgence of Russia and its aggressive challenge to the status quo. As has already been explored in the preceding section, Russia's military and economic strength is much reduced from what it could muster during the Cold War, and it no longer has the means to directly compete with the United States.¹⁸⁴ Although this latent power differential matters, Russia does have several key advantages over the west. Most critically, the United States can no longer afford to give Russia its undivided attention. At the height of the Cold War the United States maintained 450,000 troops in Western Europe; today it maintains only 64,000.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, the death of the ideological context of the Cold War has removed a major component of America's ties to Western Europe. Modern Europe is economically tied to

¹⁸³ The tragedy of the Charlie Hebdo attacks highlights this trend. The attacks symbolize the conflict between the post-reformation values of Europe and the interpretations of radical Islam. The far-right backlash the attack provoked is also note-worthy, and in Germany it singlehandedly revitalized the Pegida fringe movement that is radically anti-immigration and anti-Islam. Future attacks will only embolden these right wing nationalists. See Hockenos: 2015.

¹⁸⁴ Although there are many ways one can measure the ability to compete, one of the most striking changes has been in naval strength. In the early 1980s the Soviet Union operated nearly twice as many submarines and slightly more surface warships than the United States. The only significant advantages the US had were in overall equipment and personnel quality and in naval aviation quantity (Kennedy: 1987, 511). Today the US Navy is larger than the next 13 countries combined, meaning that no matter how aggressively Russia behaves in Eastern Europe it can no longer reasonably expect to challenge the United States for command of the the world's sea lanes that are vital to any modern nation's prosperity (Gates: 2009).

¹⁸⁵ Coffey: 2013.

Russia and largely dependent on it for its energy needs, making unified or unilateral American action against Russia increasingly difficult.¹⁸⁶

There are many explanations for the current conflict in Ukraine, and it remains unclear whether Russia desires interaction change and wishes merely to return to its historic great power role within the context of the current international system, or whether it desires a systemic change and an end to American control over it. In some respects, Russia's ultimate motivations are irrelevant. By invading a sovereign state and using military force to change national boundaries Russia has violated one of the fundamental norms of the international system – that interstate violence is no longer an acceptable means of achieving political ends.¹⁸⁷ Whether intentionally or not, this move has greatly increased disequilibrium in the international system by raising the question of the credibility of the United States to enforce the rules of the system and signaling to the world that violence is once again a possible means of achieving change – providing that the aggressor is strong enough to confound an easy solution. It has also highlighted that, for all its impressive economic strength, the European Union is not a state.¹⁸⁸ It cannot take unified military action, and as long as that remains the case European states must

¹⁸⁶ The failure of the EU to adapt to Russia's involvement in Ukraine (and foreign policy agenda more broadly) is explored in detail in a recent EU committee report (HLEUC Report # 6: 2015). One telling quote is that "The EU's relationship with Russia has for too long been based on the optimistic premise that Russia has been on a trajectory towards becoming a democratic 'European' country. This has not been the case. Member States have been slow to reappraise the relationship and to adapt to the realities of the Russia we have today" (Ibid., 23).

¹⁸⁷ This is hardly an inviolable rule, but this is the first time it has been broken in Europe since the 1999 Kosovo War. This matters because if a state can use military force to challenge another in Europe the implication is that it can happen anywhere.

¹⁸⁸ As Kissinger famously asked, "When I want to call Europe, who do I call?" (Kissinger, quoted in McNamara: 2014).

either continue to rely on the United States for their security or they must develop their own independent capabilities, something which could itself greatly destabilize Europe.¹⁸⁹

Even if the Russian threat were to disappear tomorrow, the problems besetting Europe are significant. The Eurozone crisis has shattered the illusion that Europe's economic superiority can continue indefinitely. The sluggish recovery of Europe from the Great Recession compared to India, China, and Brazil will lead to a further diffusion of wealth from Europe to Asia and Latin America. This economic change will spill over into other spheres, as the rising states convert their economic power into structural and institutional pushes for change that will occur at the expense of Europe. This change is unlikely to be preventable, given the decline in European birth rates and the difficulties involved in revitalizing post-industrial economies.¹⁹⁰

Although the preceding analysis paints a bleak picture for the future of Europe, it is important to remember that *relative* decline is not necessarily negative. If Russia's resurgent nationalism is contained, if the Eurozone debt crisis is resolved, and if both are achieved without prohibitive costs to Europe or the United States then Europe's decline could be slow and soft. Europe can continue to provide a stabilizing role in world affairs much as it has for the last several decades, but this stability will come at a price. European states will need to take on an increasing role in their own security as American attention is focused elsewhere. European governments will have to accept that they are going to lose some influence in institutions they have dominated since their inception. Finally, the Europeans themselves will have to decide how to integrate immigrants of all

¹⁸⁹ Although dated, see Measheimer: 2001, 360-402 for a "worst case scenario" of the future of Europe.

¹⁹⁰ For an in depth study of this European decline see Alesina and Giavazzi: 2006.

ethnicities, religions, and cultures as they flock to a stable Europe in the face of an increasingly unstable world.¹⁹¹ These costs will be difficult to bear, but the alternatives are worse.

If the Eurozone debt crisis is not contained it could lead to a Greek exit from the Eurozone, undermining the Euro and, potentially the entire concept of the European Union.¹⁹² The death or diminishment of the financial union could greatly harm Europe's security situation, especially if it coincides with increased European defense spending and/or a further drawdown of American forces in Europe. Combine this with an aggressive Russia, energy insecurity, and resurgent nationalism as a response to immigration and poor economic growth and the result could be a fractured Europe eerily similar to its pre-1914 situation. For decades the world has taken great power peace in Europe as a given, but this peace has been premised on American-supplied stability. As that stability comes under pressure the United States will have to decide how much of its resources it can continue to commit to maintaining Europe's stability, and Europe will have to demonstrate its willingness to contribute to stability in the international system, or suffer the consequences of disequilibrium.

¹⁹¹ Currently 4% of Germany's population and 7.5% of France's population are Muslim, the majority of whom are first or second generation (Hockenos: 2015).

¹⁹² O'Brien: 2015. One of the most dangerous things about a Greek exit is the precedent it sets. An anti-austerity alliance is already gathering steam, and there's a real danger that any Greek exit could collapse the whole house of cards.

Asia

If Latin America is slowly gaining wealth and influence while Europe flat lines or slowly loses it, then Asia is growing stronger at an almost exponential rate.¹⁹³ A recent study on the future of American power argues that if the last several centuries have revolved around the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the coming one will center on the Pacific and Indian Ocean.¹⁹⁴ The rise of India and China to great power status, the presence of a third, offshore great power in the United States and a fourth, potential great power in Japan, the simultaneous rise of several other, influential, “middle powers” such as Australia, South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia, and the continuing existence of several “pariah” regimes in Burma and North Korea suggests that if Asia is going to become the most wealthy region of the 21st century, it will also likely be the most volatile.

The economic change that has occurred across Asia over the past twenty to thirty years shows little sign of slowing down, let alone reversing. Thirty-six percent of the world lives in either China or India, and these individuals will have a vital say in how the world of tomorrow is shaped.¹⁹⁵ As they become wealthier consumers they open up vast new markets, fueling an almost limitless potential for growth. The economic competition for these markets is already intense, as Japan, South Korea, China, and the United States

¹⁹³ According to a 2015 World Bank Report European GDP is currently growing at a rate of 0.9% and Latin America at a rate of 0.8% compared to East Asian growth of 6.9% and South Asia growth of 5.5%. Furthermore, East Asian growth is expected to stay relatively steady at 6.7% and South Asian growth is predicted to rise to 6.8% by 2017 while Latin America is expected to reach 3.3% GDP growth over the same period (World Bank Global Economic Prospects Report: 2015).

¹⁹⁴ Kaplan: 2010.

¹⁹⁵ CIA World Factbook: 2015. It's important to note that in both countries a substantial proportion of the population is tied up in substance agriculture, and thus does not contribute significantly to national wealth. Nevertheless the sheer size of these countries' citizenry is an intimidating and powerful force.

compete for investment opportunities and trade agreements. The United States has proposed a free-trade agreement in the form of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that includes many East-Asian nations but pointedly excludes China.¹⁹⁶ This free trade agreement is an important component of America's "pivot to Asia" as it would reaffirm the image of the United States as a Pacific power and strengthen American ties to many of the middle powers that could prove crucial balancers as China continues its rise.¹⁹⁷

Alliances and economic ties matter because as the Asian nations have grown richer they have begun to seek to convert this wealth into political influence and military strength. On the military level this change has been relatively slow: in the entire region only China has the potential to challenge the dominant position of the United States, and even then it could only hope to win a defensive conflict close to its own shores.¹⁹⁸ This stability is subject to precipitous change, particularly if one or more of the region's great powers miscalculates. The rise of China has placed the United States in a precarious situation. If the United States takes too aggressive a posture in resisting Chinese-led change it risks leading to conflict between the two nations that could eventually turn violent.¹⁹⁹ If, on the other hand, the United States appears unwilling to maintain its commitments in the Pacific the results could be arguably worse. Without a trustworthy guarantee of American security commitments, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and

¹⁹⁶ Gordon: 2011. The existing negotiating members of the TPP are the US, Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, Singapore, Australia, Peru, Vietnam, Malaysia, Canada, and Japan. Additionally, South Korea, Taiwan, Mexico, the Philippines, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Colombia, Bangladesh, and India have all expressed interest in joining.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ For an analysis of short-term Chinese military capabilities see the subsection on China in the preceding section.

¹⁹⁹ As one China scholar put it, "at its furthest extreme containment thus becomes a prescription for preventative war" (Friedberg: 2011, 253).

Vietnam would all increase their military spending, potentially triggering a region-wide arms race that could easily include nuclear proliferation.²⁰⁰ It's not hard to imagine how this arms race – once started – would be almost impossible to halt given the added complexities of the historical relationships between the nations involved.

Adding to all this potential for change and conflict is the rise of a populous and influential India that has not yet clearly articulated how it intends to wield its newfound power.²⁰¹ If India chooses to accommodate itself to the current international system it will be a tremendous boost to the stability of the system. If India becomes an ally of the United States then China might be truly contained, unable to mount a military challenge that could overcome the current system by force or wield the economic or political muscle necessary to create an system that provides a genuine alternative to the American-led one.²⁰² If, on the other hand, India decides that it desires genuine systemic change and is willing to partner with China to achieve it the result will be catastrophic to the region and the international system as a whole. During the Cold War China, India, and a coalition of developing countries were able to resist the polarization caused by the confrontation between two superpowers. Today, with their greatly improved capabilities and expanding populations, the two nations could lead a coalition for change that would be almost impossible to contain.

The United States, therefore, should have three overriding priorities in its pivot to Asia. The first is to strengthen its relationship with India, deepening economic ties and,

²⁰⁰ Albert: 2015.

²⁰¹ See Joshi: 2014 for analysis of India's passive foreign policy.

²⁰² Ikenberry suggests that this containment will happen more or less automatically as the regional middle powers naturally balance against China's rise (Ikenberry: 2011b). Freidberg is much less optimistic, noting that anarchy and insecurity continue to be the defining features of the international environment (Freidberg: 2011, 39).

eventually, attempting to convert them into a genuine military alliance. Much of this improved relationship must come at the expense of significant interaction change: at an economic level through the inclusion of India in the TPP and other bilateral trade agreements, on a military level as India improves its military capabilities – something that will likely anger Pakistan, and on a structural level, as India seeks a greater say in world economic forms and, eventually, a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.²⁰³ These changes will be difficult but worthwhile if the United States is able to ally itself with the world's largest democracy. America's second priority should be maintaining its military deployments in Asia at a level that will prevent a regional arms race without provoking China. Doing so will become increasingly more difficult and dangerous as China's capabilities grow, but it is absolutely vital to stabilize the region. Finally, the United States should deepen its economic ties throughout the region, giving the American economy a much-needed kick and countering some of China's economic influence.

If the United States is able to do these three things then China will hopefully be contained, and have no choice but to grow and expand within the confines of the current international system. Even so, Asia is likely to become volatile in the near future and remain so indefinitely. The vast economic changes that are currently occurring and the presence of so many existing and potential great powers means that no matter what the United States does interaction and systemic change will occur across all dimensions. The imperative of the United States must be to adapt to these changes while preventing the hegemonic war that has historically accompanied them.

²⁰³ Much the same as Brazil's case, this move would have the added benefit of driving a wedge between India and China. Note that Japan too desires a Security Council seat, but it's less clear that the United States should advocate for it given Japan's constitutional prohibition on the use of force except for self-defense and South Korean hostility against it.

Africa and the Middle East

As Latin America and Asia continue their economic growth and Europe slowly stagnates they have generated significant pressure for interaction and systemic change. Africa and the Middle East, by contrast, are creating very little pressure for systemic change. Neither region boasts a current or rising great power. South Africa is sometimes considered a member of the BRICS, but its economy is stalling and its inefficient government is unlikely to revitalize its economy or society anytime soon.²⁰⁴ In the Middle East Saudi Arabia and Iran are both potential regional hegemon, but neither has the strength to defeat the other, and both are held in check by the United States and Israel.²⁰⁵ This is not to imply that Africa and the Middle East are irrelevant to the wider world affairs – far from it. But the absence of a great power strong enough to push for systemic changes of the international system does set these two regions apart from the others studied here. Instead, the most pressing push for change originating in Africa and the Middle East is not interactional or systemic, but systems change.

The great danger emanating from Africa and the Middle East are not the dangers arising from rising states, but failed ones. In Nigeria the war against the Boko Haram terrorist organization has failed to dislodge the group, which has recently won decisive

²⁰⁴ An example of South Africa's corruption and inefficiency woes is that it has one of the world's highest education spending rates as a percentage of GDP but its students' performance in math is the second lowest in the world (Gómez: 2014).

²⁰⁵ Note that there are some signs that an Iranian/Saudi Arabian rapprochement is possible, if unlikely. A drawdown of competition between these two countries would have profound implications for security in the Middle East. See Guzansky and Neubauer: 2015 for a study of this possibility and a brief overview of relations between the two states.

victories against the Nigerian army and African Union (AU) troops in Cameroon.²⁰⁶ In Somalia Al Shabaab – another Al-Qaeda affiliated group – has managed to hold off an AU offensive led by Kenya.²⁰⁷ Finally, in war-torn Syria and Iraq The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has carved out a vast swath of territory and proclaimed a new Islamic Caliphate.²⁰⁸ These terrorist organizations are challenging the monopoly of the use of force traditionally controlled by the state. They are using transnational financing networks and recruitment to fight weak and failed states, and in doing so they are creating a subtle pressure for systems change of the international system. Despite the local depredations of these organizations, this pressure is unlikely to lead to major systems change in the foreseeable future. The nation-state system remains dominant, even in most of Africa and the Middle East, and short of a catastrophic man-made or natural disaster in the region that seems unlikely to change. Nevertheless, these organizations – and others like them throughout the world – significantly contribute to global disequilibrium.²⁰⁹

The challenges facing the United States in the Middle East and Africa are significant. It must partner with local actors to combat the sources of systems change across the region. It must act to prevent an arms race in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran, maintain the security of regional shipping lanes and the vital flow of oil, and prevent the spread of potential pandemics when local governments are unable to effectively act. Finally, it must act as a buffer between Israel and the Arab world. All of

²⁰⁶ Coleman and Wendel: 2014.

²⁰⁷ Fergusson: 2013.

²⁰⁸ Cronin: 2015.

²⁰⁹ By “others like them” I refer to the multitude of transnational organizations that use violence against states but do not desire statehood (or at least nation-statehood). This includes drug cartels and some extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, but excludes other such as Hamas, which, because it desires its own state, does not create pressure for systems change, though it undoubtedly contributes to disequilibrium.

these efforts consume American resources that could otherwise be productively invested or used to respond to the rise of the new great powers.

The implications of all this is that although Africa and the Middle East lack a rising power or (as long as Iran is prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons) a regional hegemon, it will continue to contribute to disequilibrium. America's inability to withdraw from the Middle East demonstrates the necessity of maintaining stability in the region for global trade and security. It is vital to insure that the United States does not pay the entire costs of maintaining this stability alone. The challenges facing Africa and the Middle East cannot be solved by any one power, and the regions are an important opportunity for the world's great and middle powers – existing and rising – to work together with regional actors to combat extremism and drug trafficking, prevent pandemics, and create new development opportunities. This international cooperation is necessary and desirable; no current state – rising or otherwise – benefits from systems change, and it is, therefore, in the interests of all nations to work together to provide stability in Africa and the Middle East.

Conclusion

Major economic change has fundamentally shifted the balance of power in several key regions around the world. In most cases, this economic change has coincided with attempts at structural and (less frequently) military change, placing new constraints on American action in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The United States should adapt to these shifts by accepting and supporting change that does not negatively impact the overall stability of the system or the key interests of the United States, while resisting

change damaging to the international order. The United States must understand that as Europe declines in economic influence relative to rising powers in Asia and Latin America it must also decline in political and military significance. This suggests that the United States – while not abandoning its European commitments – must also seek out new partners to help share the costs of system maintenance. If the United States can convert Brazil and India into status quo powers (at least on a systemic level) while maintaining the support of western Europe and influential middle powers in Asia such as Japan and South Korea, it can distribute the costs of maintaining the status quo much as Great Britain did vis-à-vis the United States in the first half of the 20th century. This will compel Russia, China, and future rising power to integrate into an international system strong enough to resist disequilibrium. Finally, the United States must seek the help of these rising powers in combating extremism and the broader dangers associated with weak and failed states in Africa and the Middle East.

Achieving all this will be difficult on many levels, as it requires a fundamental rethinking of the American approach to international relations. The United States must accept that the international order is rapidly becoming less unipolar, but that the United States still fulfills a vital role in its stability. Responding to these two seemingly contradictory realities will require difficult decisions and sacrifices. Until the rising great powers fully integrate into the international system the United States must continue paying the costs of a unipolar power while wielding the influence of a multipolar power. The alternative is to risk alienating the same powers that will soon become essential partners in maintaining stability. Unfortunately, it remains unclear whether the United States can muster the political will to accept change without creating conflict.

V A Lackluster Response

Introduction

A US National Security Brief released in February of 2015 was unique in explicitly stating that the United States continues to have a decisive influence in the international order.²¹⁰ In a section on “International Order” the document makes it clear that the United States “has an opportunity—and obligation—to lead the way in reinforcing, shaping, and where appropriate, creating the rules, norms, and institutions that are the foundation for peace, security, prosperity and the protection of human rights in the 21st century.”²¹¹ This explicit acknowledgment of the American role in systems maintenance is unusual in a national security document, which generally deal with more immediate threats to American security interests.²¹² The Strategy lays out five keys steps to what amounts to continued American leadership around the globe: “Advancing our Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific,” “Strengthening Our Enduring Alliance with Europe,” “Seek Stability and Peace in the Middle East and North Africa,” “Invest in Africa’s Future,” and “Deepen Economic and Security Cooperation in the Americas.”²¹³

These slogans are well and good, but in the section that follows I analyze how the United States’ deeds in each of the four regions studied above match American rhetoric and the realities of the situations. My intent is to explore what capacity the United States truly has to maintain stability in the international system, and judge how affective a job it has done so far. To do so I first study the raw economic, political, and structural capacity

²¹⁰ National Security Strategy: 2015, 23-29.

²¹¹ Ibid., 23.

²¹² It and the 2010 document were the only ones to have an entire section devoted to the “international order.”

²¹³ Ibid., 24-28.

of the United States to maintain stability in the face of rising challengers. I then examine how the United States has chosen to wield its unique power, and predict whether or not it can continue to do so in a sustainable manner over the next several decades.

Exaggerated Economic Decline

The 2008 financial collapse exposed some fundamental weaknesses in the American economy. Financial deregulation, low interest rates, and high levels of liquidity caused by what former Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernake called the “global savings glut” all contributed to the worst financial meltdown since the great depression.²¹⁴ Although the United States and its European allies are slowly recovering from the crash, their recovery looks weak when compared to the continued seven to eight percent growth of the Chinese economy.²¹⁵ It’s tempting to label these economic problems aspects of imperial overstretch, but this oversimplifies the issues facing the American economy. The United States faces new economic competition and suffers from several structural weaknesses that harm its growth rate relative to countries like China, but many of these issues do not arise from America’s position as the hegemon of the international system.

Kennedy argues that the two great tests confronting the United States are “whether, in the military/strategic realm, it can preserve a reasonable balance between the nation’s perceived defense requirements and the means it possesses to maintain those commitments; and whether, as an immediately related point, it can preserve the technological and economic bases of its power.”²¹⁶ To a large extent the United States

²¹⁴ Altman: 2009.

²¹⁵ Friedberg: 2011, 241.

²¹⁶ Kennedy: 1987, 514.

has thus far done so. In fiscal year 2013 the United States spent twenty-one percent of its budget on Defense.²¹⁷ By comparison, Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security combined made up 47.9 percent of the budget.²¹⁸ This is by far the highest military budget by percentage of GDP: Russia currently spends roughly 17 percent of its total budget on defense and China spends around 6.2 percent on its military, although that figure has been substantially rising in recent years.²¹⁹ Thus while the US budget is substantially larger than any potential challenger is it not as oversized as commonly imagined when compared to the total United States budget. The budget deficit is the largest it has been since the end of the Second World War, and it does represent a significant threat to the long-term ability of the United States to maintain control of the international system, but it is not caused by imperial overstretch. Whether or not it is a solvable problem depends on the willingness of the rising powers to share the costs associated with system maintenance and the ability of American politicians to find long-term solutions to the rising costs of social security and health care.

Worsening this situation for the United States are two structural economic problems that may adversely affect its ability to maintain equilibrium in the international system. The first of these is that the United States has primarily transitioned to a service economy, and service economies have traditionally shown lower rates of growth than manufacturing economies (such as China's).²²⁰ Furthermore, domestic consumption in the United States far outweighs the equivalent in developing countries, and consumes resources that could otherwise be put into productive investments or system

²¹⁷ Nye: 2010.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Wong: 2014. China's 2014 military budget rose by 12.2 percent from 2013 alone.

²²⁰ Gilpin: 1981, 165.

maintenance.²²¹ Both of these weaknesses have afflicted historical hegemons, but the United States maintains one unique strength that previous great powers have not. The United States is consistently revitalized by fresh waves of immigrants, who in their hunger to succeed help avert what Gilpin terms “the corrupting influence of affluence.”²²² These immigrants earn 40 percent of the doctorates in science and engineering, and 65 percent of doctorates in computer science. Half of all Silicon Valley start-ups have at least one founder who is an immigrant or first generation American.²²³ These new Americans are vital to the continued strength of the American nanotechnology, biotechnology, and software industries. As long as the United States maintains its relatively open immigration policies it can help mitigate some of the structural challenges intrinsic to a mature economy.

A Greatly Misused Power

The economic supremacy of the United States is slowly drawing to a close, and as the preceding two sections have explored, so is its control over the great power system. Despite this, the United States retains a decisive advantage over nearly all aspects of hard power, including economic might, geographic position, and military strength. The United States spends more on defense research and development than the rest of the world combined, multiplying its already great advantages over a potential military challenger.²²⁴ This spending has not bankrupted the United States; total defense spending is currently around 4 percent of GDP, comparatively less than the British equivalent at the height of

²²¹ Ibid., 166-167.

²²² Ibid., 165.

²²³ Zakaria: 2008, 198.

²²⁴ Zakaria: 2008, 182.

its power in the mid 19th century.²²⁵ The economic potential of the United States has taken a hit in recent years, but there is no reason to believe that the United States will experience imperial overstretch in the near-to midterm future.

In the soft power arena, the United States faces competitors for the first time in decades, but there are still no states that pose a genuine alternative to American leadership. There might be a broad international consensus that the United States has sometimes overplayed its hand, yet every time an international crisis develops, it is assumed that the United States will be there to step in, whether the Balkan crises in the 90s or a minor border skirmish between Morocco and Spain in 2002.²²⁶ The reputation of the United States has been recently tarnished, yet a majority of the citizens in almost two thirds of the world's nations have a favorable view of the United States.²²⁷ Of the four BRIC states, Russia is the only one in which a majority of its citizens have an unfavorable view of America.²²⁸ Nor has support for the United States fallen off among its traditional allies. In the last six years the number of individuals with a favorable view of the United States increased 12 percent in South Korea, 13 percent in the UK, 16 percent in Japan, 20 percent in Germany, and 33 percent in France.²²⁹ External wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan and domestic issues such as the Ferguson protests and Senate torture report damage American standing in the world, but there is little evidence to

²²⁵ Ibid., 182 and Kennedy: 1987, 176.

²²⁶ Zakaria: 2008, 215. The crisis in question (the Parsley crisis over an uninhabited island in the strait of Gibraltar), was mediated by then Secretary of State Colin Powell after the EU, UN, and France failed to broker an agreement.

²²⁷ Pew Research Center: 2014.

²²⁸ Ibid. Only 23 percent of Russians currently have a favorable view of the United States, compared to 50 percent in China, 55 percent in India, and 65 percent in Brazil.

²²⁹ Ibid. As of 2014, 82 percent of South Koreans, 66 percent of Britons and Japanese, 51 percent of Germans, and 75 percent of the French have a favorable view of the United States.

believe that the majority of foreign nationals see a real alternative to American hegemony in the near future.

This structural power of the United States is largely invisible, but is an essential component of continued American control over the international system. It manifests itself in the continued vitality of the dollar as the world's reserve currency, the goodwill the United States gains by providing the public goods of open trade and an (at times imperfect) guarantee of national sovereignty, and the large amount of influence wielded by the United States in the world's two most influential international institutions, the IMF and the UN Security Council. American structural power is also apparent in the vast alliance systems the United States leads. Three-quarters of the world's forty wealthiest states are US allies. By comparison only one (Thailand) is a Chinese ally.²³⁰ The structural power of the United States helps maintain equilibrium in the international system because it makes it difficult for potential challengers to appear legitimate. Perhaps the most pertinent sign of this is that only half of the Chinese believe that China will one day replace the United States as the world's superpower.²³¹

Despite all this, the United States has done a seemingly poor job of system maintenance over the past two decades. In Europe the norms of territorial integrity are being threatened by a revisionist Russia to which Washington has yet to articulate a convincing deterrent.²³² In Asia the rise of China has already sparked concerns of a newly

²³⁰ Jones: 2014, 27.

²³¹ Pew Research Center: 2014B.

²³² Foreign policy experts are split over whether sending weapons to the Ukrainians will help or worsen the situation, but clearly the current strategy of targeted sanctions has failed to deter the Russians or unite the western European countries. See "Should the United States Arm Ukraine?" 2015.

militarized Japan adding to the region's existing instability.²³³ The United States has yet to demonstrate a clear vision of how Brazil and the rest of a rising Latin America will fit into an expanding world order, and while it hesitates the region searches for alternatives to a system it sees as unbalanced.²³⁴ Finally, in the Middle East decades of American mismanagement –most recently its failure to pacify Iraq – have led to unrest, civil war, and a growing Sunni extremist threat throughout a region where parts of Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq remain failed states that continues to export violence alongside critically vital oil and gas.

While some of these failures were beyond the ability of the United States to predict, the magnitude of challenges facing the international order was not inevitable. The primary disconnect that has caused much of the challenges against the continued American leadership of the international system have been caused by a fundamental misreading of the global order. Too often, American leaders have acted as though the favorable conditions of the 90s – unchallenged American economic superiority and a complete lack of alternative “polls” – remained true today. As the preceding analysis has suggested, these conditions have not existed for some time, and the United States must now adjust to operate in a world where there are many competing interests that must be acknowledged. The United States can continue to lead, but it can no longer act unilaterally.

The situation in Iraq is an example of the failure of unilateral action. The initial invasion went against the interests of many of the United States European allies as well as the wishes of the Chinese and Russians. It angered Iran and prompted it to respond

²³³ Miller: 2014.

²³⁴ Reid: 2014, 245-247.

with support to various terrorist networks throughout Iraq and the Middle East. Furthermore, although the United States was able to use its military superiority to easily crush the regime of Saddam Hussein, it was unable to build a sustainable democratic government in its wake, giving rise to lawlessness and the takeover of much of the countryside by the Islamic State. All of this has so far cost the United States more than two trillion dollars and more almost four and a half thousand dead soldiers, while further destabilizing the region.²³⁵ Crucially, it has pulled American resources away from where they are really needed, in Asia – to balance the rise of China, and in Europe, to balance the resurgence of Russia. Although the eventual impact of the Iraq War is uncertain it is difficult to foresee how complete stability could be restored without a second occupation, something that currently appears politically untenable.²³⁶

The Ukrainian Crisis is another situation that demonstrates how the United States has misused its global position of leadership. The Russian occupation of Crimea and its ongoing support for rebels in eastern Ukraine has been internationally condemned, and even China has been critical of Russian actions in the region.²³⁷ Despite this consensus, the United States has found it difficult to organize a sanctions regime against Putin's actions. Instead every American move has been met by bickering on the part of Europeans who are afraid that by angering Russia they might trigger a new Cold War that would threaten their trade relations and supplies of oil and gas.²³⁸ The United States has failed to provide a credible solution to this dilemma or a credible deterrent to Russia's

²³⁵ Trota: 2013.

²³⁶ The 2011 Libyan conflict demonstrated that although states can be destroyed from the air they cannot be rebuilt without boots on the ground.

²³⁷ Kofman: 2014. The Chinese are generally against states meddling in other states internal affairs.

²³⁸ Shaffer: 2014 demonstrates the danger that Russia's oil monopoly poses to European security.

actions. This is not to say that there is a silver bullet to the Ukrainian Crisis – or any international conflict currently involving the United States.²³⁹ These are difficult issues that demand well thought out responses, but too often the United States has allowed short-term crises to distract from longer-term interests.

A New Way Forward

Taking a long-term view requires the United States to act strategically, not respond to events as they occur. Too often American actions are driven by short-term public opinion, not long-term strategic thinking. Obama’s decision to withdraw from Iraq fulfilled a campaign promise and was wildly popular domestically, but the resulting power vacuum resulted in the Islamic State seizing hundreds of miles of territory throughout Iraq and destroyed the Maliki government. This collapse was predictable; up to a year before the last US combat troops left Iraq experts were predicting that a sudden American pullout would be disastrous for regional stability.²⁴⁰ Despite this, the United States did withdraw and the result has been continued instability and a constant drain on American resources.²⁴¹

If the United States is to avoid similar situations in the future it must pursue more long-term strategies, and it must abandon ideological constraints to action. In the case of

²³⁹ The Ukrainian crisis in particular is complicated by the fact that on the face of it Ukraine “matters more” to Putin than it does to Washington, since Ukraine is within Russia’s traditional sphere of influence Putin is willing to go farther than anyone in the west to maintain a buffer state (see Mearsheimer: 2014). I contend, though, that the implicit challenge to international norms that Russia’s actions have provoked should make Ukraine a more important issue for the stability of the current order than it is commonly perceived.

²⁴⁰ In particular see O’Sullivan: 2011 and Parker: 2012.

²⁴¹ According to Pentagon sources airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria cost an average of 8.4 million dollars a day. See www.defense.gov: 2015.

Iraq this involves partnering with Iran, which has a key stake in the future of Iraq and is a natural partner against the Sunni Islamic State.²⁴² Although official alliances are off the table for historical reasons, there are signs that the United States is already quietly partnering with Iran, and Haider al-Abadi – Iraq’s new Prime Minister – appears to enjoy Iranian support, a vital component of his continued legitimacy.²⁴³ It’s possible that the United States is considering doing so in Syria as well, partnering with President Assad to defeat the Islamic State in its home territories.²⁴⁴ The United States must be willing to do more of this in the future, working with former rivals and enemies as it responds to new threats to international stability.

There is historical precedent for this action. By the mid 1800s Great Britain had fought two wars with the United States, and during the American Civil War it covertly supported the Rebels in an attempt to weaken the United States. Yet by the late 19th century the Royal Navy was enforcing the Monroe Doctrine and upholding American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.²⁴⁵ This support, and the trade it encouraged, bound the United States to Great Britain, converting it from an adversary to a partner in maintaining international stability against the revisionist powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan. It’s not difficult to imagine how the First World War could have ended differently if the United States decided that its interests were advanced more by a German victory than continued British hegemony.

²⁴² In particular see Barzegar: 2015.

²⁴³ Almaliky: 2015.

²⁴⁴ Simon: 2014.

²⁴⁵ Perhaps most importantly, Great Britain supported the United States over Spain in the Spanish American War and did not respond to the subsequent buildup of a competitive blue-water navy.

The United States should accept the lessons of history and be willing to convert yesterday's foes to tomorrow's partners. This is as true in Asia, Latin America, and Europe as it is of the Middle East. In Asia the United States can work closer with former allies and adversaries such as Vietnam and other ASEAN members to constrain the rise of China.²⁴⁶ These smaller states are most directly threatened by a more assertive China, and partnering with them can signal to China that while the United States welcomes its rise, it will not tolerate violations of the norms of national sovereignty and self-determination. In Latin America the United States should continue to extend an olive branch to Cuba and other countries that have traditionally opposed American intervention in the region. Doing so could prevent these countries from turning to Brazil as a genuine alternative to American leadership and remove barriers to greater American engagement in Latin America.²⁴⁷ Finally, in Europe the United States should make explicit its security guarantees to former Soviet States such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. These countries are already NATO members, but if Russia misinterprets the American commitment to defending them it could lead to a conflict between the two great powers that would prove almost impossible to control. The best way to prevent such a conflict is to demonstrate the American commitment to NATO with a greater military presence in the region.²⁴⁸ If Russia does not believe it can quickly win a military confrontation with one of these small states it is less likely to force a crisis than it would be otherwise.

²⁴⁶ Acharya: 2007.

²⁴⁷ Not only will a thaw in relations with Cuba be beneficial from an economic standpoint (see Fernandez and Lorber: 2015), it has the potential to split the anti-American ALBA coalition in Latin America (see Crandall: 2011) greatly easing American engagement in the region.

²⁴⁸ See Feifer: 2015.

The United States has already made some adaptations to suit the changing geostrategic situation, most noticeable in Europe and Asia. In Europe the United States has is actively seeking greater economic ties to Europe through the introduction of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), a free-trade agreement that is optimistically predicted to create between .5 and 2 percent GDP growth on both sides of the Atlantic along with 2 million new jobs.²⁴⁹ It also has the potential to ease Europe's reliance on Russia for its energy needs and unify Europe and the United States. America has also responded to Russian aggression through the creation of a brigade-sized NATO quick response force that would be capable of deploying to an eastern European country within days of a crisis.²⁵⁰

These actions are laudatory, but the United States must balance maintaining the status quo in Europe without distracting from its ongoing commitments in the Middle East and North Africa, derailing its rebalance to Asia, or preventing it from widening its investments in Latin America. The current proposed composition of the brigade is a welcome sign, the troops will be exclusively German, Dutch, and Norwegian.²⁵¹ The manner in which the costs of maintaining the brigade will be distributed throughout NATO has not been settled though. The United States must ensure that it does not allow European matters to obscure the larger strategic picture and that the costs of system maintenance are shared by its allied great powers.

The United States has also made promising strides in Asia. President Obama has made improving relations with India a priority through a high profile visit to New Delhi,

²⁴⁹ Barker: 2013.

²⁵⁰ Gordon: 2014.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has the potential to increase America's economic clout in East Asia.²⁵² American-led multilateral naval operations in the straits of Malacca and off the Horn of Africa have served to deter piracy and demonstrate the United States control over the Indian Ocean's shipping lanes, but it is unclear whether these actions have been enough to fully reassure Japan and South Korea that the United States remains the preeminent Pacific power.²⁵³ The US Navy has not yet articulated a coherent reply to threats posed by Chinese ASBM and littoral assets such as surface warships, missile boats, and submarines. The United States should not provoke confrontation or seek to threaten Chinese assets, but it must maintain a viable deterrent throughout East Asia. If China does act provocatively, the United States must be willing to take any and all steps necessary to contain it, including using military force to defend American allies and close the strait of Malacca.

This renewed commitment to the Pacific must include outreach to Latin America as well as Asia. The United States has already invited Mexico, Peru, and Chile to join the TPP negotiations, and should consider an additional Latin America free trade agreement that could serve to weaken the region's growing economic ties to China.²⁵⁴ The United States should also rethink its approach to regional institutions such as the OAS, and accept that allowing smaller Latin American States more of a say will be necessary to prevent a rebellion against American influence in the region.²⁵⁵ At the same time, the

²⁵² Gordon: 2011.

²⁵³ See Kaplan: 2010, 15-16 and Miller: 2014.

²⁵⁴ Wyne: 2015.

²⁵⁵ President Bush Junior's administration in particular harmed opinions towards the United States in Latin America, and some ALBA states maintain that the United States was behind the 2002 attempted coup in Venezuela. See Sabatini and Marczak: 2010.

United States must demonstrate that it retains the capacity – economically, militarily, and politically – to lead in the Western Hemisphere.

Avoiding the appearance of dominance is not the same as abandoning a position of leadership, and the United States must continue working through regional institutions to solve transnational problems such as drug trafficking, border disputes, and the effects of climate change.²⁵⁶ Thawing American relations with Cuba are an encouraging sign that the United States may be slowly abandoning its ideologically rigid approach to Latin America, but even this small step could be reversed by a congress that shows no sign of softening its tone towards the region.²⁵⁷ The United States must convince Latin America that it is genuinely committed to change and accepts that it is no longer the overbearing hegemon of the western hemisphere.

Conclusion

The United States has taken some actions to respond to change in the international system that have improved its ability to resist disequilibrium in the international system, but the country needs to do much more. The United States continues to possess a vibrant economy that will allow it to continue paying the costs of system maintenance for the foreseeable future, but it can no longer act as the world's only superpower. The rise of the new great powers of India Brazil, and China has altered the balance of power in Asia and the western hemisphere, and the resurgent nationalism of Russia has threatened the stability of Europe. The United States has been slow to respond to these changes, an

²⁵⁶ Transnational drug traffickers are themselves a systems challenge to the international order, and a crucial area in which the United States must work with other Latin American countries to restore the state's monopoly on the use of force.

²⁵⁷ Fernandez and Lorber: 2015.

inevitable result of institutional inertia that is nevertheless no longer sustainable. The United States must accommodate change when it can, and use tough rhetoric and prompt action when it must. If the United States continues in its unilateral manner it will alienate potential allies and increase the costs of maintain the status quo, but if it acts indecisively it raises the potential for miscalculation and conflict.

VI Conclusion: Change and Conflict

The world is shifting inexorably, and as economic potential is redistributed to Asia and Latin America pressure for consummate political and structural change will increase. The rise of the new great powers of India, Brazil, and China will usher in an era of increasing disequilibrium and instability throughout the international system as they press for greater control over their own destinies. Historically, disequilibrium in the international system has been resolved through violent hegemonic conflict between the new and status quo powers. The most recent examples of hegemonic war – the two world wars of the 20th century – cost over 100 million combined fatalities and resulted in a fundamental reordering of the international system.²⁵⁸ This study is, at heart, a search for an escape from that fate.

The existing theories on change in the international system – most prominently Kennedy’s theory of imperial overstretch and Gilpin’s related thesis – suggest that the costs of system maintenance inevitably come to outweigh the ability of the leading hegemon to pay, resulting in younger great powers initiating systemic change.²⁵⁹ Although the historical analysis conducted by these two scholars suggests that major change and conflict have been synonymous in the international system, their predictions of the imminent decline of the United States and its replacement by either Russia (Gilpin) or Japan (Kennedy) have thus far been inaccurate. The United States remains the world’s most powerful military, economic, and structural power, and though it has lost ground

²⁵⁸ Levy: 1983, 88-91.

²⁵⁹ See Kennedy: 1987 and Gilpin: 1981.

over the past two decades to rising powers, there is as of now no power with the resources or will to replace the United States as the world's hegemon.²⁶⁰

Despite the continued lack of a peer competitor, the United States is slowly losing its economic, political and military dominance as India, China, and Brazil rise. This relative decline does not necessarily imply the end of American leadership, but it does require a shift in how Washington views and acts towards the rest of the world. The United States is more constrained than at any time since the end of the Cold War, and in some places it faces stiffer competition. China, Brazil, India, and the European Union are in a far better position to compete with the United States economically than the Soviet Union ever was, and this competition has harmed the ability of the United States to maintain the status quo.²⁶¹ America already pays the heavy costs of systems maintenance, including its ongoing commitments in the Middle East, its spending on the world's only expeditionary-capable blue water navy, its payments that support international institutions such as the World Bank IMF, and the UN, and its deployments of soldiers in bases around the world. These costs will only increase as the rising powers increase their relative share of world wealth and translate some of it to larger military forces and a push for greater institutional representation. Therefore although the United States is not yet overextended it soon could be short of a major drawdown of American presence overseas or an increase in burden sharing among all the great powers.

²⁶⁰ See Jones: 2013, Ikenberry: 2011a and Zeihan: 2015 for examples of America's enduring strength.

²⁶¹ Not only are the new great powers more numerous, they have the advantage of competing within the open trade networks of the existing international system, something the Soviet Union never could.

If this overstretch occurs – or, just as importantly, appears to occur – it will give the rising powers an opportunity to attempt to overturn the international system and create a new order that better suits their interests.²⁶² At best this will lead to a period of profound instability as nations lose faith in existing institutions and norms but are unable to find viable alternatives. A similar situation gripped Europe at the turn of the 19th century, as the old balance of power faded and no new powers stepped into the vacuum. At worst, disequilibrium will lead to great power war, either as United States uses force to attempt to prevent systemic change or as a rising power uses force to achieve it. In either case there will be serious disruptions to development, international trade, and global security as states compete in an increasingly anarchic environment.

These disruptions are not inevitable, but preventing disequilibrium will require a readjustment by the status quo powers and restraint on the part of the rising powers. The United States must accept interaction change throughout the international system, including a redistribution of representation and influence in international organizations such as the UN and IMF and a diffusion of military power to the rising powers.²⁶³ The rising powers must also demonstrate restraint, accepting that gradual change is a necessary alternative to disequilibrium, resisting the impulse to engage in arms-races that

²⁶² This could take the form of abandoning existing institutions in favor of new ones (such as the recently created BRICS Bank alternative to the IMF) or attempting to secure control of existing institutions (such as India and Brazil's desire to obtain UN Security Council seats).

²⁶³ The practical implication of this acceptance requires that the United States accept institutional reform, understand that its bargaining power in international affairs such as trade negotiations and international crisis response will be curtailed relative to the rising powers, and avoid overreacting to minor rebalancing of military capabilities.

have historically accompanied systemic change, and accepting that not all of their desired reforms of the existing system will be implemented.²⁶⁴

If both status quo and rising powers do exercise restraint, then the changes to the international system could ultimately prove beneficial, both to global living standards and international stability. The United States would gain new support in maintaining the current system, reducing the potential for imperial overstretch and increasing the resources it has available for continued technological development and the promotion of global trade and development. The rising powers would gain many of the trappings of great power status they desire while continuing to grow in a stable international environment largely maintained with United States leadership. The rest of the world too would benefit from the peaceful rise of new great powers, which already make vital contributions to international development and disaster relief funds.²⁶⁵ The new great powers also have the potential to become partners with the United States on international issues such as climate change, transnational terrorism, and international crime.²⁶⁶ These

²⁶⁴ These three components of restraint are necessary to avoid situations that have historically developed in times of systemic change. Too-rapid change can lead to instability as institutions and other systemic barriers to conflict become outdated before they can be renewed – an example of this is the rapid breakdown in the balance of power in Europe that accompanied the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars. Another danger of the rise of new great powers is that they will compete with one another as they rise – see Copeland’s analysis that a crucial cause of the First World War was security competition between the rising powers of Germany and Russia (Copeland: 2009). Finally, an all or nothing approach to systemic change can provoke a balancing backlash, as Germany, Italy, and Japan’s ideological challenge to the existing system did in the 1940s.

²⁶⁵ The 100 billion dollar BRICS Development Bank and the Chinese New Asia Infrastructure Development Bank are examples of how soft-power competition with the United States can benefit developing nations, although at an as yet unmeasured cost (Gómez: 2014).

²⁶⁶ The 2014 Climate Change Accord between the United States and China is an example of a rare moment of cooperation between the two powers that has the potential to galvanize a global climate change deal, something that would have been almost impossible without agreement between the two nations (Landler: 2014).

joint ventures could build trust and cooperation between the great powers while fighting some of the most pressing systems challenges.

It is possible that the rising great powers will integrate into the international system, prompting change without significant conflict and avoiding the Thucydides' Trap, but that path is far from certain. The most recent US National Security Strategy concludes that, "we confidently welcome the peaceful rise of other countries as partners to share the burdens for maintaining a more peaceful and prosperous world."²⁶⁷ This indicates an understanding on the part of the current administration that the world order is shifting, and that the United States must shift with it. Unfortunately, while words are important, deeds are what will ultimately determine the pace and character of change in the international system. It is one thing to state in a document that the United States welcomes the rise of other countries, it is another to take the political steps necessary to ensure that this rise is indeed peaceful.

The United States must separate its short-term national interests and its longer-term investment in the stability of the international system, and understand that an uncompromising commitment to the former risks undermining the latter. Ultimately, that's a difficult path to walk in the face of short-term electoral politics and the diverse interests of important interest groups hostile to any act that appears a concession. There is precedent, though, in the manner in which Great Britain accommodated the United States. It traded influence, economic interests, and ultimately, strategic power in the western hemisphere in return for peace and an eventual alliance with the United States. A redistribution of power in the international system is possible without conflict between

²⁶⁷ US National Security Strategy: 2015.

the rising and falling power, but it requires visionary leadership and an educated public willing to accept that change is inevitable but conflict is not.

The systemic change that gave rise to the current international order has an additional, less hopeful lesson. Great Britain was willing to accept the rise of the United States and the diminishment of its influence in the western hemisphere, but it could not accept the ideologically and revisionist driven rise of Germany and Japan. Nor could Russia, Japan, and Germany cooperate as they simultaneously rose to new power and prominence. Conciliatory American attitudes will matter little if the rising powers seek to change the international system in ways that are antithetical to the existing norms and institutions or are unable to cooperate with each other. Russia's violation of national sovereignty in Ukraine and Georgia is an example of such behavior, and China's ongoing border disputes with many of its neighbors (including India) raises the potential for conflict, not cooperation. If these two powers continue to challenge stability in this manner the result will be disequilibrium, whether the United States is willing to cooperate or not.

Thus the United States must walk a fine line in the coming decades, accepting incremental change not fundamentally damaging to the stability of the international system while demonstrating that it retains the capacity to meet violations of the international order with overwhelming force. This task will grow ever greater as the BRIC states continue to rise, increasing the costs of acceptable change to the status-quo states and lessening the ability of the United States to effectively respond to change it cannot accept without overcommitting its relatively reduced resources. Nevertheless, it is

possible for the United States to successfully stave off disequilibrium, providing the rising powers can be satisfied with incremental change.

The Shree Kodari School in Nepal is a symbol for the potential benefits and dangers of change in the international system. The competition between India and China for influence over Nepal has had an important positive influence on Nepal's development, resulting in new schools, dams, roads, and loans. These aid packages have been crucial in a region that is frequently ignored by Washington and relies on international assistance to provide for its people. This could be the new future, where great powers compete in an attempt to outdo one another in assistance to developing countries they seek to bring within their spheres of influence. Unfortunately though, there is another reason for India and China's competition over Nepal's affections.

As the only unfortified boarder between the two rising powers, Nepal represents the ultimate high ground, territory which will become vital if India and China ever again engage in violent conflict. This is the future the United States and the rest of the world must work to avoid. Change and conflict need not be synonymous in the international system, but escaping Thucydides' Trap will require a sustained effort on the part of world leaders that has seldom before been attempted. The path ahead is difficult and dangerous, full of sacrifice, and all but impossible to predict, but the only alternative to forward progress is to fall.

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