Fall 2023

The Effect of Power Shifts on War

Jeffrey D. Torrieri
Gettysburg College

The Effect of Power Shifts on War

Abstract

Instances where an actor is experiencing a significant gain in power or is watching the power they once had slowly slip away seem like breeding grounds for conflict. This gives rise to the question: What effect does the rapid rise or decline of a significant actor's power in the international system have on the likelihood that a system-changing war will occur? The basis of my answer to this question lies in both the power transition theory and the theory of hegemonic war. By critically analyzing the two aforementioned theories, addressing scholarly critiques of these theories, and making predictions about a prominent contemporary rising power, China, I will attempt to shed light on the hypothesis that system-changing wars are more likely to occur when a major actor experiences a rapid shift in power in either direction.

Keywords

China, Power Transition Theory, Theory of Hegemonic War, Power Shift

Disciplines

International Relations | Political Science | Political Theory

Comments

Written for POL 103: Introduction to International Relations.

Jeffrey Torrieri
Professor Hartzell
POL 103
06 November 2023

The Effect of Power Shifts on War

War has long been a product of an international system that is made up of a plethora of actors trying to gain and maintain power. In some cases, wars between major actors are so large and impactful that they can cause a shift in the international order, changing the system as it exists. Such wars, in the process of altering the system, can cause unfathomable amounts of destruction, death, and trauma to the people fighting in these wars and those caught in the middle of them. Because of the impact that major wars have on the international system, and because of the destruction that can ensue as a result of these wars, it is prudent to try to figure out what the causes of these wars are so that they can be prevented in the future. The best way to go about doing this involves examining trends in the behavior of actors within the international system to formulate and test theories about the causes of war.

In system-changing wars, which are wars so large and impactful that they result in "broad changes in political, strategic, and economic affairs…" on a global level (Gilpin 1988, 592), power, or perceived power by the belligerent actor over their adversaries, can be a large factor in why the war begins in the first place. By this logic, situations where an actor is experiencing a monumental gain in power or is watching the power they once had slowly slip out of their grasp seem like breeding grounds for conflict. This gives rise to the question: What effect does the rapid rise or decline of a significant actor's power in the international system have on the likelihood that a system-changing war will occur? The basis of my answer to my question lies in the power transition theory, which offers credence to the idea that system-changing wars are

started when a major power is dissatisfied with its position on the world stage (Organski and Kugler 1980), as well as the theory of hegemonic war, which contends that system-changing wars will occur when the rigid international structure, which is topped by a dominant nation, becomes disturbed by a force that is eroding the power of the dominant nation (Gilpin 1988). Building upon these theories is the idea that a nation either experiencing a rapid gain of new power or watching the influence it once had slip away will be more inclined to wage war when this is combined with the fact that it is dissatisfied with its global standing. By critically analyzing the two aforementioned theories, addressing scholarly critiques of these theories, and making predictions about a prominent contemporary rising power, China, I will attempt to shed light on the hypothesis that system-changing wars (i.e., World War II) are more likely to occur when a major actor experiences a rapid shift in power in either direction.

THE POWER TRANSITION THEORY

The power transition model, as originally spelled out in *The War Ledger*, predicts that nations are likely to become aggressors when they are experiencing rising power yet still feel like they are receiving a smaller share of the benefits than other equal, yet more established, powers are receiving from the international system. This is due to the fact that these rising powers were not part of the original coalition of nations that built the international order and, as a result, were not designed to receive the advantages that other great powers are in such an order (Organski and Kugler 1980). Without support from other great powers, these rising nations would logically resort to aggression in order to cement themselves in the position they think they deserve on the world stage.

Whether or not the emergence of a rising power disturbs the international system enough to cause a war depends on some factors. Not only does it depend on the size of the rising nation,

but also on the "speed with which modernization occurs within big countries…" (Organski and Kugler 1980, 21). It is likely only a rapid shift in power that would cause a conflict to occur, as a slow rise in power would give the dominant nation more time to work out the problems that are occurring as the rising nation transitions (Organski and Kugler 1980). Besides size and speed, the level of power that the rising nation actually achieves relative to how much power the dominant nation has is also important. A rising nation that achieves a power nearly equal to the power that which the dominant nation has will be more likely to incite a system-changing conflict (Kim 1991; Kim 1992).

Woosang Kim adds to the power transition theory as expressed in *The War Ledger*, arguing that major war becomes more likely when the established dominant nation feels threatened by the way in which a newly rising power, a power which may become the new dominant power, is changing the international order (1992). Kim writes, "Threatened by demands for changes in the existing international order, the dominant nation has a large stake in preserving the status quo, in which it and its allies share the benefits and privileges of…. The dominant nation, with the support of its allies, tries to thwart the challenger's progress. During such a period of power transition…major power war is more likely." (Kim 1992, 156-157). This means that there are two ways in which power transition could lead to war; if the rising power feels left out or if the dominant power feels like they are being overshadowed.

The power transition theory can be useful when trying to figure out if a contemporary situation in International Relations shows potential for major conflict. One such situation is the rise of China as a potential challenger to the United States as the dominant nation on earth (Clarke 2011). Throughout the bulk of this century, China has been rapidly growing both economically and militarily. China has also been seeing a sharp increase in the amount of soft

power, which is the ability for a nation to influence another nation without using force or pressure, that it wields (Nguyen 2017). China has been able to expand its soft power by exporting its culture to other parts of the world. For example, the Chinese film industry has grown to become the second largest in the world, and it is being used to promote Chinese culture to global audiences (Nguyen 2017, 51). The expansion of soft power can be used by China to rise in overall power more discreetly, as the actual effect of soft power can't be measured as easily as something like GDP growth. This discrete rise in power, when combined with its military and economic expansion, will allow China to appear to be rising in power even faster relative to the United States, which, according to Organski and Kugler, is a main factor in increasing the likelihood that a power transition will lead to war (1980).

The power transition theory is not without its flaws, as literature exists that claims to disprove, or at least critique, Organski and Kugler's theory. According to one critique, very few of the dominant nations since the beginning of modern International Relations (1648), "were seriously threatened by rising powers or coalitions of great powers. They went to war because they thought they were powerful enough to become more powerful still" (Lebow and Valentino 2009, 405). One of the nations that Lebow and Valentino reference as not seriously threatened by coalitions of great powers was Nazi Germany (2009). I would argue that, if you actually examine this time period from the perspective of the power transition theory, it was Nazi Germany that was the rising power threatening the declining dominance of Britain and France, and Britain and France declared that they would fight Germany if it invaded Poland out of fear of Germany superseding them as the dominant power if they were to successfully do so. Such an explanation would also fit in with Woosang Kim's addition to the power transition theory stating that a dominant power would be willing to go to war for the sake of preserving the status quo

from which they benefit, as Britain and France had enjoyed effectively running Europe post-World War I until Hitler became aggressive (1992).

THE THEORY OF HEGEMONIC WAR

Another theory that builds upon ideas similar to the ones laid out in the power transition theory is Thucydides' theory of hegemonic war. This theory essentially says that the stability, or instability, of the international system is determined by the presence, or absence, of a rigid hierarchy of nations, topped by a clear hegemon (which can be defined as single dominant power the global order (Snidal 1985)), free of economic or political disturbances (Gilpin 1988). In a disturbed system, the threat of instability breaking the hierarchy of nations has the potential to ignite a hegemonic war, which can lead to a system change if the hierarchy is successfully broken by the conflict (Gilpin 1988).

In the modern day, the theory of hegemonic war, like the power transition theory, can be examined when looking at the rise of China, which is predicted to be "an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony" (Beeson 2009, 95). If China was to try and claim this hegemony in this type of way, it would surely shake up the US-led global order, as China would be essentially taking a major region of the world, East Asia, out of US control. Given that China's economy and military have been growing rapidly over the last few decades, the nation has become the world's largest importer and exporter of goods, and has seen its military budget rise by almost a factor of ten in the past twenty years, it seems the country is gaining power enough to attempt a reclamation of the region (Nguyen 2017). Furthermore, the East Asian powerhouse has already begun to challenge the US "through trade agreements, political rhetoric, and regional organizations that together build up a soft balance against the U.S. primacy"

(Nguyen 2017, 58). If this challenge gets to a point that the United States begins to feel a disturbance in the current hierarchy of nations, a hegemonic war could very possibly occur.

Though the theory of hegemonic war is useful in examining possible threats to the current international system, it is far from a perfect theory. One issue with the theory is that it assumes that "collective action in the international system is impossible in the absence of a dominant state," even though "Graphical analysis…show[s] that cooperation can not only be sustained in the face of declining hegemony, it may even be enhanced." (Snidal 1985, 579-580). Such information could disprove the hegemonic war theory's assumption that the absence of a rigid hierarchical structure of the international system with a hegemon on top will lead to turmoil, seeing as how cooperation is the opposite of conflict. On the contrary, however, one could point to instances in history where the absence of a clear hegemon led to instability, and eventually to system-changing war. Webb and Krasner point out that in the period between the first and second World Wars, a time marked by political instability in Europe and global economic depression, Britain, which acted as the global hegemon before the first World War, had lost its ability to do so, and the United States, which emerged from World War I as the only real candidate to replace Britain, refused to assume such a role (1989). I would add that the fact that World War II, the deadliest system-changing war in history, directly followed this inter-war time of hegemonic instability further proves that the turmoil caused by the absence of a hegemon in the international order could outweigh any attempts at cooperation.

APPLICATIONS TO ASSUMPTIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The theories I elaborate on above are inextricably linked to broader theoretical perspectives on the study of International Relations. The power transition theory, as well as the theory of hegemonic war, to an extent, are fundamentally identified with neorealist theory

because of the focus on national security as the chief concern of major powers in the international system. Neorealists, as we learned in class, make the following assumptions about the international system: states are the only significant actors, the issues that states face are arranged in a fixed, hierarchical structure with national security always at the top, and states act as a unitary actor. The power transition theory looks exclusively at how states interact within the international system, ignoring any supranational powers, international organizations, or even individual actors that could alter the course that these states take on the way to power transition. Organski, Kugler, and even Gilpin seem to consider all of the various actors, both groups and individuals, within states as part of one whole, which is a fundamentally neorealist idea. This comes as no surprise, especially considering that the theory of hegemonic war is based on the writing of Thucydides, who was the ancient Greek historian considered the father of the realist theories.

CONCLUSION

By examining the assumptions that are made by both the power transition theory and the theory of hegemonic war, which I have determined can hold up to the scrutiny of critical opinions, I have determined that my original hypothesis, which is that system-changing wars are more likely to occur when a major actor experiences a rapid shift in power in either direction, is supported. The power transition theory supports this hypothesis by explaining the idea that a state that is quickly rising in power can often cause the state that is already in the dominant state of power, or is slipping out of the dominant state of power, to feel threatened, which could lead to a major war between these powers. The theory of hegemonic war validates this hypothesis by explaining a similar phenomenon in which a hegemonic power, when feeling that the

international system allowing them to retain such dominant power is in danger of collapsing, is likely to initiate a major conflict in an attempt to preserve the system.

I believe both of these theories are useful in making predictions about how the current, rapidly rising power of China in a United States-led international system could possibly lead to the first system-changing war since 1945. Knowing that these theories have merit to them, we can assume that it is at least possible that preventing future relations between the United States and China from turning into a power struggle where the US is feeling as if China is trying to undermine or overtake it could make a difference in preventing system changing wars. The next step would be trying to figure out meaningful policy goals that both nations could advance to proactively stop such a disaster from occurring. That, however, is a question for a different time.

Works Cited

Beeson, Mark. 2009. “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The Dynamics of Chinese and American Power.” *Review of International Studies* 35 (1): 95-112. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20542766

Clark, Ian. 2011. “China and the United States: A Succession of Hegemonies?” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 87 (1): 13–28. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20869608.

Gilpin, Robert. 1988. “The Theory of Hegemonic War.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (4): 591–613. https://doi.org/10.2307/204816.

Kim, Woosang. 1991. “Alliance Transitions and Great Power War” *American Journal of Political Science* 35 (4): 833-50. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2111496?seq=16

Kim, Woosang. 1992. “Power Transitions and Great Power War from Westphalia to Waterloo.” *World Politics* 45 (1): 153–72. https://doi.org/10.2307/2010522.

Lebow, Richard Ned & Valentino, Benjamin. 2009. Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory. *International Relations*, 23(3): 389-410. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809340481

Nguyen, Thi Thuy Hang. 2017. “The Rise of China: Challenges, Implications, and Options for the United States.” *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30 (½): 47–64. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26465816.

Organski, A.F.K., and Kugler, Jacek. 1980. *The War Ledger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Snidal, Duncan. 1985. “The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory.” *International Organization* 39 (4): 579–614. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706716.

Webb, Michael C. & Krasner, Stephen D. 1989. “Hegemonic Stability Theory: An Empirical Assessment.” *Review of International Studies* 15 (2): 183–98. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097178.