

# World Order without Hegemony

ZORAWAR DAULET SINGH

Most Western theories presume that a titanic clash will occur during a power transition. But what if rising powers cannot assume the burden of underwriting the world order? We must contemplate alternate futures where a changing balance of power does not necessarily yield a new hegemony or a breakdown in the basic tenets of international order.

At the heart of foreign policy debates today is the question of a changing balance of power. As Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out recently, “The changes we are encountering in the world are unseen in a century” (Xinhua 2018). In an important speech delivered in June, the Indian Prime Minister too had alluded to global power shifts, uncertainty, and geopolitical competition. “This world is at a crossroad. There are temptations of the worst lessons of history” (MEA 2018a). How do we make sense about power transitions? Is change possible without a violent confrontation?

Evoking a metaphor from the legendary Thucydides, it has been argued that in 12 of 16 cases from the past five centuries in which a rising power has confronted the dominant power, the result has been a violent struggle. The so-called “Thucydides Trap” does appear to be a recurring pattern over a long span of history (Allison 2015). The sources or processes that bring about the power shifts are also a recurring historical phenomenon. The late Robert Gilpin illustrated this cycle with much insight: Uneven growth rates and technological diffusion shifts power from the centre to the periphery of the system. Over time, this results in a disequilibrium between the burden of maintaining the existing world order and the material capacity available to the dominant power to supply public goods and enforce that order. And, “From the perspective of rising powers, the perceived costs of changing the international system have declined relative to the potential benefits of doing so” (Gilpin 1981). The only way to resolve this disequilibrium is through some form of accommodation between the dominant and rising powers, or the functioning of the system itself will be imperilled. For most of history this bargaining process has ensued in a great struggle,

often violent and nearly always contentious. The baton then passes to a new contender who resuscitates the overall structure and takes the onus of managing order and the global economy (Gilpin 1981: 185–87).

The most famous instances of a peaceful power transition are actually quite extraordinary. The shift from British to American leadership, an uncontested passing of the baton between two culturally similar powers, and, the dramatic end of the Cold War in 1989 when the Soviet Union unilaterally decided to call a truce and end the ideological confrontation with the United States (us). It then quickly obliged its rival by disappearing from the scene altogether. These instances of a peaceful power transition are very unusual. Will this time be different?

To begin with, we must immediately recognise that a structural feature from the first Cold War still persists. The largely stabilising results of the nuclear revolution are firmly in place and make any notion of a violent assault on the existing order such as the one waged by Germany and Japan unthinkable. The status quo is resilient in that it cannot be militarily altered in a large-scale fashion. But strategic stability does not preclude competition or even limited conflicts. The Cold War witnessed several armed, if proxy, confrontations that were waged relentlessly despite the presence of nuclear weaponry as a restraining factor for large-scale war. Over the past decade, we have seen instances across Eurasia of rising powers defying the authority of the declining hegemon through limited military interventions or decisive strategic moves to alter the balance of power in several regions.

## Mutual Accomodation

The renowned Edward Hallett Carr, during the 20 years’ crisis leading up to World War II, had laid out two necessary conditions for a peaceful power transition. First, the contending powers must possess the material leverage to bring pressures to bear on the dominant states for otherwise the latter would have few incentives to accept changes to the status quo.

Zorawar Daulet Singh ([zorawar.dauletsingh@gmail.com](mailto:zorawar.dauletsingh@gmail.com)) is a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, Delhi.

Second, the dominant states who draw the most benefits from the status quo have a moral obligation to make concessions so a successful and reasonable compromise can be reached (Gilpin 1981: 206). More recently, theorists have added to Carr's appeal for "a spirit of give and take" by suggesting that rising powers too have a moral responsibility to craft an accommodation because the power transition could otherwise "generate so much insecurity that the threat of war comes not from the challenger or challengers, but from the dominant but declining power" (Bukovansky 2016: 91). Given the enormous stakes, "both hegemon and aspirant must draw on some common stock of ideas in order to intentionally develop meaningful practices of accommodation" (Bukovansky 2016: 87). Thus, as Carr argued, "peaceful change can only be achieved by a compromise between the utopian conception of a common feeling of right and the realist conception of a mechanical adjustment to a changed equilibrium of forces" (Carr 2001: 222–23).

There would be contrasting opinions on whether these conditions apply to the contemporary setting. Given the mismatch between perceptions of relative strength between the us and its rivals as well as the absence of any constructive or far-sighted discourse in the West to channel its international policies towards reforming the world order other than merely a parochial quest to preserve its material privileges and unsustainable geopolitical commitments, the path to a peaceful accommodation does seem a bleak one.

Asia's rising powers, however, differ in several ways from their Western predecessors, making any extrapolation from European geopolitical history an untenable proposition. One key difference in the ongoing power transition compared to previous eras is the civilisational and cultural attributes that the new contenders exhibit in their basic international identities and behaviour. Asia's rising powers are more internally oriented, and their traumatic colonial or semi-colonial encounters have instilled a conception of sovereignty and an image of world order that is not in consonance with the

roles played by traditional great powers of the Eurocentric mould.

Moreover, it is still unclear what distinct values and ideas the rising powers bring to bear on world order. If we dispassionately look at Chinese, Indian, and other discourses on globalisation and world order we do not notice a revisionism—certainly not akin to a Germany or Japan from a century ago—nor a revolutionary spirit like say exhibited by Napoleonic France or by Mao's China during its radical phases, but rather a pragmatic and a largely rational outlook. One could even argue that the rising powers are changing their foreign policies and global roles more in reluctance and circumspection and in response to safeguarding their material interests that developed during the period of us preponderance. And, while there may well be a degree of exceptionalism and manifest destiny in elements of the strategic communities of rising powers, it does not even remotely resemble the proselytising and ambitious geopolitical cultures of the Western powers during their rise.

Another key reason for rising powers' caution and restraint is that the domestic burdens of managing order in these continental-sized states are too vast to seriously entertain an aggressive or overly ambitious geostrategy. The rising powers will be strong enough—or have already acquired that capacity—to veto key issues of global governance but not powerful enough and internally coherent enough to intellectually and materially assume the role of upholding the world order. So far, China's manifest destiny is about rejuvenating itself rather than any grand vision to remake the world. There is a stark difference—between Western powers that typically possessed ideological and cultural motivations that underpinned ambitious internationalism and the very real and constraining effects that Asia and Eurasia's rising powers confront and will continue to do so during the power transition. It complicates the application of the theory of hegemonic stability that is premised on the expectation of a near total transfer of global responsibility from the declining hegemon to the rising power and the zero-sum struggle that ensues during this process.

Finally, we must address the question of legitimacy, that is, whether and to what extent the fundamental dimensions of the existing world order are seen as legitimate by the rising powers. If they largely are—on issues such as an open world economy and a rules-based multilateral trading system, respect for the commons, for norms on sovereignty and territorial integrity, on nuclear deterrence—then the conundrum of a power transition is essentially one of mutual accommodation on the big table of global governance rather than one of radically revising the basic framework that underpins world order.

One of China's leading international relations scholars, Yan Xuetong recently reflected on this fact. While declaring that "the post-Cold War interregnum of us hegemony is over," Yan admitted that, "Beijing has no clear plan for filling (the) leadership vacuum and shaping new international norms from the ground up" (Xuetong forthcoming). He insists that "China's ambitions for the coming years are much narrower" than assumed in Western security establishments, and that Beijing is "in no hurry to become the sole object of Washington's apprehension and scorn, would much rather see a multipolar world in which other challenges—and challengers—force the United States to cooperate with China" (Xuetong forthcoming). In his year-end speech, Wang Yi, China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister, described a new era of competition restrained by interdependence:

China and the United States do have some disagreements, which is only natural. And the existing problems between the two countries cannot be resolved overnight. However, their interwoven ties and intertwined interests also determine that China and the United States cannot be decoupled or completely isolated from each other. (MFA 2018)

### Rejecting another Cold War

And, finally what could we say about India's predicament? A key assumption for India's strategic thinking in the post-Cold War period has been the adjustment to the reality of one power centre that shaped political and economic life across the globe. This unbalanced structural setting—unipolarity as it was described by many—led to the Indian foreign policy of a sustained, albeit gradual

at each step, integration into the us-led order and a transformation in bilateral relations with the us and its allies. It was a bipartisan effort and, for the most part, it could be claimed that Indian policy-makers accomplished this process within the amorphous confines of strategic autonomy with some success.

But given the diffusion of global power and disintegration of the unipolar consensus, should India reimagine its role and place in this changing world? There are some who argue that strategic autonomy is no longer viable in an age of complex interdependence further complicated by a resumption of great power competition, and that India must choose a side.

It is fascinating that Indian thinking, as reflected in joint statements or communiqués with the competing great powers, demonstrates a clear intention to uphold aspects of the international order that are in sync with India's interests. So with the us, Delhi proclaims a commitment to an open and free order, with a particular focus on the integrity of the maritime commons. With Russia, it is committed to legitimising multipolarity and inclusive security architectures as well as endorsing UN-centred norms on sovereignty. With China, India

shares a common interest in a liberal economic order as well as constructing new development financial institutions responsive to the needs of the global South. At the Wuhan talks, both agreed to build "an open, multipolar, pluralist, and participatory global economic order" (MEA 2018a). So it is not accurate at all when observers mock India for being all things to all powers, and argue that this balancing act is an exercise in delusion. Rather, India's multi-directional foreign policies should be seen as a reflection of the diffusion of global power and the fact that different great powers' interests, visions, and goals coincide with India's in different domains of power or issues, with each issue significant for India's domestic transformation or geopolitical security.

India's outlook to the power transition has, so far, been sensible:

Asia of rivalry will hold us all back. Asia of cooperation will shape this century. So, each nation must ask itself: Are its choices building a more united world, or forcing new divisions? It is a responsibility that both existing and rising powers have. Competition is normal. But, contests must not turn into conflict. (MEA 2018b)

As a potential swing power, India must continue to reject a Cold War

philosophy and play a responsible role in promoting and shaping a post-hegemonic world order.

REFERENCES

Allison, Graham (2015): "The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, 24 September.

Bukovansky, Mlada (2016): "The Responsibility to Accommodate: Ideas and Change," *Accommodating Rising Power: Past, Present, and Future*, T V Paul (ed), Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

Carr, Edward Hallett (2001): *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939*, New York: HarperCollins.

Gilpin, Robert (1981): *War & Change in World Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

MEA (2018): "India-China Informal Summit at Wuhan, Press Release," 28 April, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina\\_Informal\\_Summit\\_at\\_Wuhan](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina_Informal_Summit_at_Wuhan).

MEA (2018): "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at the Shangri La Dialogue, Singapore, 1 June, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

MFA (2018): "Speech by Wang Yi at the Opening of Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations in 2018," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 11 December, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zjyh\\_665391/t162-1221.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zjyh_665391/t162-1221.shtml).

Xinhua (2018): Full Text of Chinese President Xi's Speech at APEC CEO Summit, 17 November, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-11/17/c\\_137613904.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-11/17/c_137613904.htm).

Xuetong, Yan (forthcoming): "The Age of Uneasy Peace: Chinese Power in a Divided World," *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-12-11/age-uneasy-peace>.

# Economic & Political WEEKLY

## Review of Urban Affairs

### March 24, 2018

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Frontier Urbanism: Urbanisation beyond Cities in South Asia                                    | —Shubhra Gururani, Rajarshi Dasgupta |
| Receding Rurality, Booming Periphery: Value Struggles in Karachi's Agrarian-Urban Frontier     | —Nausheen H Anwar                    |
| Seeing Mumbai through Its Hinterland: Entangled Agrarian-Urban Land Markets in Regional Mumbai | —Sai Balakrishnan                    |
| Dalal Middlemen and Peri-urbanisation in Nepal   | —Andrew Nelson                       |
| Fragmentary Planning and Spaces of Opportunity in Peri-urban Mumbai                            | —Malini Krishnankutty                |
| Urban Transformations in Khora Village, NCR: A View from the 'Periphery'                       | —Shruti Dubey                        |
| People Out of Place: Pavement Dwelling in Mumbai   | —Gayatri A Menon                     |
| Partitioned Urbanity: A Refugee Village Bordering Kolkata                                      | —Himadri Chatterjee                  |

For copies write to:  
 Circulation Manager,  
**Economic & Political Weekly,**  
 320-322, A to Z Industrial Estate, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg, Lower Parel, Mumbai 400 013.  
 email: [circulation@epw.in](mailto:circulation@epw.in)