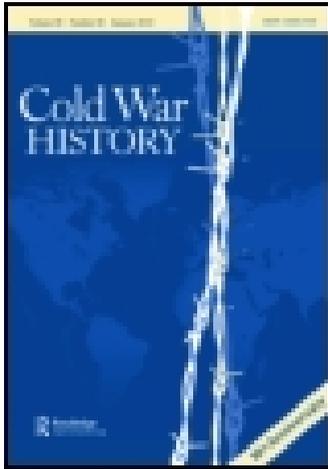


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Of ghosts and other spectres: the Cold War's ending and the question of the next 'hegemonic' conflict

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Our intent in this article is to try to determine if the manner of the Cold War's ending can suggest anything useful to those of us who ponder whether the twenty-first century will be able to break from the dismal cyclical pattern of all previous centuries, and become the first span of decades to exorcise the evil spirit of great power war. Our task is to employ cyclical constructs in such a manner as to cast doubt upon the 'cyclical determinism' of the power transition pessimists.

Introduction

There is a saying in baseball, repeated with solemnity by legions of players, that 'what goes 'round, comes 'round.' It is such an unassuming catchphrase that it must be thought by its utterers to express an important idea. And yet, it is not altogether clear what message is supposed to be conveyed by the dictum. It seems the expression has two meanings, each of them reasonably benign. On the more optimistic side, it speaks of a cyclical perspective on the part of the players who give it voice, revealing a lightly-veiled confidence that no matter how badly things may look for them and their team at the moment, fate will have a way of decreeing a stunning reversal in prospects, such that victory will yet be wrenched from the steadily closing jaws of defeat. On the

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somewhat less optimistic side, it conveys a sense of acceptance, possibly even *Schadenfreude*, in case fate does not generate the hoped-for outcome: the victors (the other team) will also realise how fleeting glory can turn out to be.

Either way, the cyclical epistemology of the baseball diamond yields lessons, to players as well as to their fans: things will turn out reasonably OK, in the end. We win, fantastic; we lose, there will always be another day. Neither one of this article's authors is a baseball player, though each is a fan of the sport, one more passionate about it than the other. But in the 'game' that the two of us do make our profession (the study of international security from the perspective of International Relations theory), we find the baseball apothegm to be apposite. It is true that most IR wonks and other political scientists might not express the consequences of cyclical analysis in the same manner as we do here, but it is obvious that for so many of them, theirs is a world of which it can indeed be said that what goes 'round, comes 'round. Only unlike on the baseball diamond, on the playing field of the IR specialist, the implications derived from a cyclical reading of reality are not always so pleasant. In particular, one demon haunts the thoughts of those specialists whom we might lump together under the rubric of 'power transition theory', and it is a ghost that features so prominently in the inquiry we pursue in these pages: the spectre of recurring great power war.

Our intent in this article is to try to determine if the manner in which the Cold War's ending of a quarter-century or so ago can suggest anything useful to those of us who ponder whether the twenty-first century will be able to break from the dismal cyclical pattern of all previous centuries, and become the first span of decades to exorcise the evil spirit of great power war. This is an especially poignant moment for scholars to be drawing upon the Cold War's ending for potential guidance about the future, given that increasingly worries grow that a looming geostrategic rivalry between the US and China might lead to armed conflict between the two, even if neither side wants this to happen.¹ Some practitioners of power transition theorising have even developed a body of analysis encased within the perspective of 'hegemonic war', and for them it is well-nigh inevitable that this will be the terminal point of the brewing strategic unpleasantness between the US and China.

Our task in this article is to employ cyclical constructs in such a manner as to cast doubt upon the 'cyclical determinism' of the power transition pessimists, in part by drawing upon what we take (with trepidation, to be sure) to be the – or better yet, a – 'lesson' imparted by the ending of the Cold War a quarter-century ago. Now, as neither of us is an

¹ A conflict that, for some, will be triggered by competition for scarce mineral resources. Inter alios, see Michael Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (New York: Holt, 2002); Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012); Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); Kent Calder, *The New Continentalism: Energy and Twenty-First Century Eurasian Geopolitics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Dambisa Moyo, *Winner Take All: China's Race for Resources and What It Means for the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); and Stephen Burgess and Janet Beilstein, "This Means War? China's Scramble for Minerals and Resource Nationalism in Southern Africa", *Contemporary Security Policy* 34 (April 2013): 120–43.

historian, we leave to other contributors to this special theme issue the job of detailed historical analysis of the prominent moments and debates attending the ending of the Cold War, as glimpsed with the benefit of a quarter-century's worth of hindsight. Our own role in this project is to grapple with the problem of cyclical determinism. As will shortly become apparent, we ourselves are hardly immune from thinking and writing in cyclical terms. It is just that we do not see why the field of cyclical analysis should be handed over completely to the power transition pessimists, and their hegemonic warfare kith and kin. There can also be a more positive reading of cycles, especially insofar as analysis focuses upon the interplay between the alternating patterns of military revolutions and the development of diplomatic practices. We attempt to highlight this more positive reading immediately below, where we pay close heed to what one of us has termed the 'cycles of Mars'² – namely those periods in history during which it can be said that 'military revolutions' emerged to give structure to the international political system, as well as to the practices of the political entities that constitute the system.

In the second section of our article, we change the normative tone, and zero in on one particularly dyspeptic cyclical reading of that system, advanced by the body of scholars who labour in the fields of power transition theory, which maintains that one is correct to worry about the impending prospect of great power war. Following this is our third section, in which we argue that the *über*-pessimism of the hegemonic war theorists is woefully misplaced, in no small measure due to the absurdity attending claims about hegemony in the international *political* system. In our conclusion, we hint that the way in which the Cold War drew to an end a quarter-century ago suggests a good reason why, if one must resort to cyclical reasoning, the relative optimism of the baseball players is a safer bet than the unalloyed doom-and-gloomism of the power transition theorists.

The Cycles of Mars

As we noted in the introduction, it is far from unusual to encounter analysts of international security relations resorting to cyclical modes of understanding, explaining, and possibly even predicting major trends and forces in the international system. One cyclical variant of theorising, not nearly so popular as power transition theory yet nevertheless pregnant with deep significance for the very evolution of the international system down to the present day, concerns the appearance and recurrences of what we might call 'military revolutions' (not to be confused with a more recent and even trendy term, the so-called 'revolution in military affairs', or RMA).

As we understand it, the idea of military revolutions expresses one of the most powerful forces to have, historically, accounted for the manner in which the contemporary states system has been structured. As such, it ranks as an outstanding heuristic device, serving to guide our thinking about the interplay between radical

² Michel Fortmann, *Les Cycles de Mars: Révolutions militaires et édification étatique de la Renaissance à nos jours* (Paris: Economica, 2010).

alterations in the manner in which warfare is waged and the rise, decline, and (occasionally) re-emergence of sovereign states. All cyclical theorists, not even excluding the power transition ones (though they may not explicitly recognise it), owe a great debt to earlier work in the field of military revolutions, a debt that we argue in this section needs frankly to be acknowledged and assessed. So let us see what instruction can be gleaned from the cyclical interplay between military revolutions and changes in the nature of states – and, to some, even of the state system itself.³

Although it is hardly an uncontested concept, the idea of a military revolution seems to us to correspond rather well with observed reality. Whether we have in mind the development of artillery and fortifications in the sixteenth century, the emergence of professional armies and construction of naval armadas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the changing nature of recruiting and financing armies during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic decades connecting the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the technological and organisational advances of the latter century, the mass mobilisation of societies for the total wars of the twentieth century, or the development of nuclear weapons in that same century, it is obvious that revolutionary military change revealed itself in equally radical transformations in the manner in which the modern state has developed.

Some historians might insist that the nature of these changes has tended more toward the evolutionary than the revolutionary,⁴ but we think the stronger word is appropriate, for war truly is a ‘non-linear’ phenomenon, characterised by sharp and usually brutal disjunctures. Taking just the case of one country’s (France’s) martial experience, we can observe that from Crécy (in 1346), through the wars of Italy (1494–98), Valmy (1792), Sedan (1870), trench warfare (1914–18), the German spring offensive (1940), Diên Biên Phu (1954), possibly even Operation Desert Storm (1991), one common theme emerges and recurs: the sudden and dramatic manner in which military operations become transformed, and in the process generate commensurate transformations in the development of the French state. Nor is there anything particularly unique about the case of France. As a term, ‘military revolution’ may indeed be a rhetorical gadget, but it is one that reveals much more than it obscures, testifying as it does to the fundamental discontinuities of military history.

This being said, it remains essential to acknowledge some of the concept’s shortcomings. The first of these is inherent in the use made of it by some observers, who want to imagine that there is, or must be, a rather short temporal span that connects technological innovations with corresponding changes in organisational structure and doctrine. That there is and has to be a connecting span is obvious to us;

³ Apropos the latter, Alexander Wendt has argued that the emergence of a “world state” effectively putting paid to the contemporary Westphalian system is foreordained, and largely because transformations in warfare have so elevated the costs of great power conflict as not only to render it an impossibility, but also to generate unstoppable momentum toward the erection of a global, Weberian, state possessed of a monopoly over the legitimate, and organised, use of violence; see Wendt, “Why a World State Is Inevitable”, *European Journal of International Relations* 9, 4 (2003): 491–542.

⁴ See, for this claim, John Childs, *Warfare in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Cassel, 2001).

it is just that often there are many lags in the linkage between the so-called 'independent variable' of military revolution and the 'dependent variable(s)' produced thereby, and it is important to realise that sometimes a good deal of time can pass before the consequences of the revolution become apparent. One example of such a chronological discrepancy came with the invention of firearms in the early sixteenth century; the consequent adjustments in infantry tactics required to incorporate the reality of such portable weaponry were not fully effected until the eighteenth century – quite a time lag! Secondly, we sometimes find the reversal of the time-lag problem above, when the effect produced by the revolution turns out to be both immediately consequential yet soon irrelevant: an example here would be the introduction of the dreadnought, whose pre-eminence for naval strategy was to prove short-lived, as these capital ships were quickly to cede pride of place to aircraft carrier in the navies of the great powers.

All of this is to remark upon the fallacy of assuming that there can be any basal coherence to the process of innovation. Ruptures produced by the experience of warfare necessarily respond to a very chaotic dynamic, one that is both multi-dimensional and unpredictable. For all its faults, however, we think the concept of military revolution is especially useful when we try to puzzle out the connection between transformations in the art of warfare and their consequences for the evolution of states, with all that such a connection implies, as we will show below, for the future likelihood of great power war. Indeed, it is the impacts that military revolutions have had on the development of states that are primarily of interest to us in this article, because they are so intimately bound up with our related problématique(s) of power transition and hegemonic war. In this respect, few matters can be of greater importance than war's implications for the activity labelled 'state-building'. And nowhere are these implications better expressed than in the well-known observation made by the historical sociologist, Charles Tilly, to the effect that states may have made war, but war made states.⁵

So let us spend a bit of time exploring the meaning and consequences of Tilly's adage, starting with an examination of some important themes advanced by other scholars. Prominently amongst the latter we highlight Bruce Porter, who toward the conclusion of his magisterial work, *War and the Rise of the State*,⁶ underscored two salient aspects of the link between warfare and state evolution. The first is his reminder that conflicts necessarily imply destruction, which in turn suggests that the dismantling rather than the erecting of military, political, and social structures is what first must take place in any given historical period. In this sense, then, war does not so much make political entities as it 'un-makes' them. The wars of the Renaissance undid the medieval feudal order, and ensuing conflicts continued the process thus begun,

⁵ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States: A.D. 990-1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

⁶ Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

such that by the twentieth century warfare had led to the disappearance from the scene of the vast majority of the political units that had dominated the European scene over the course of the previous five centuries.

Yet amidst so much death and destruction, war, precisely because of what it was undoing, also tended to 'make' states, forcing those that survived the culling process to undertake radical transformations not only in the way they organised themselves militarily, but more importantly for our purposes here, in the manner in which they did so politically. This, of course, is the meaning of the Tilly dictum. But Porter highlights a second aspect of the process, one that suggests a certain paradox. War, and the radical transformations it brings in its train, can also lead to political reform of a 'progressive' nature, contrary to what is argued by so many scholars, who are prepared to argue that war's most lasting political significance is to enhance the coercive power of the state.

Not only did Tilly himself initially believe the latter to be so,⁷ but so too has Brian Downing similarly stressed how warfare worked against the continued prospect of democracy in pre-modern Europe. For him, what war did was to uproot pre-existing constitutional dispensations that had safeguarded the rights of local communities and assured the relatively equitable distribution of competencies as between the central government and other social forces. This, Downing writes, happened in many European lands, including France, England, Prussia, Sweden, Holland, and even Poland. In all of these places, constitutionalism was forced by the exigencies of war-fighting to give way to absolutism. It was, in short, a question of *nécessité oblige*, triggered by rulers' desire to optimise available resources for combat. Absolutism being the mode of government more suitable for such optimisation, it followed that absolutism must get the upper hand over constitutionalism.⁸

Recent scholarship, however, has offered an alternative perspective on this postulated cyclical dynamic, one that while not denying the stimulating impact warfare might at first have had upon absolutism, nevertheless insists that the story of political development as it has been influenced by war cannot be allowed to halt simply at that early stage. According to this newer perspective, the exigencies produced by resource-optimisation tended to have a paradoxical political consequence, in the manner in which they brought into being a new mode of relating as between governors and elites,⁹ such that the former's resource needs led them increasingly to negotiate with, rather than coerce, local and regional authorities. Tilly himself was one of the first to pronounce this interesting finding, namely that the resource needs of rulers involved in war led them away from, rather than toward, absolutism, forced as they

⁷ Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 3–83.

⁸ Brian Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁹ Jan Glete, *War and the State in Early Modern Europe: Spain, the Dutch Republic and Sweden as Fiscal-Military States, 1550–1660* (London: Routledge, 2002).

were to recognise collective rights of the ruled, and obligations of the ruler. Not only this, but rulers had to take another step leading away from the absolutist state: they needed to erect public-administration institutions staffed by a corps of competent (in theory, at least) bureaucrats, whose existence and authority would serve as a check on absolutist tyranny. In a very real sense, bureaucratisation came to symbolise 'civilianisation' of the governing structure(s) and as such, constituted a major development in the progressive evolution of states.¹⁰

In sum, war has had a peculiar impact upon the development of the modern state, so peculiar in fact that we have used this section on the 'cycles of Mars' to make an important point regarding the manner in which historical cycles have been interpreted by students of IR: not all cyclical stories have an unhappy ending. It is possible to trace a line between warfare and the rise and solidification of democracy, odd as this must seem to many analysts. What else should we make of Bruce Porter's observation that if in the short run modern warfare had the effect of centralising state power, in the long run it contributed to the strengthening of democracy?¹¹ Certainly, it did not have this effect universally, not even in Europe where the relationship between war and the rise of the democratic state was most evident. But as a general rule, it is hard to dispute that over time, war was a constant handmaiden to the progressive transformation of the European (and by extension, North American) state from what it had once been to what it today represents.

Can we say, though, that the ironic transformation detailed above has resulted in an *irenic* one as well, such that today's Western state has so thoroughly shed its earlier war-induced development pattern as to constitute the foundation of a future 'world state' in which the spectre of great power war becomes an absurdity, because it is a contradiction in terms?¹² Not really. What we can say, though, is that great power war has become a rarity, and certainly not since 1945 have the states that make up both the West and 'the Rest' engaged in this species of conflict (unless, of course, one assumes that the proxy wars of the Cold War were simply great power wars in drag). Interstate warfare itself, extant rather than extinct, has nevertheless become much less common in recent decades, notwithstanding the plethora of *intrastate* conflicts that continue to blight the face of global politics.

The declining frequency of great power wars is no mean accomplishment, and in theoretical terms many scholars have professed to detect the source of Mars's having been banished from at least some global neighbourhoods. Democracies, they claim, may fight non-democracies, but they rarely if ever go to war against each other democracies – or to be more precise, against fellow *liberal* democracies. This corpus of assumptions we know as 'democratic peace theory' (DPT), and to the extent that the upbeat cyclical tale we have told in this section makes sense, we can establish

¹⁰ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*.

¹¹ Porter, *War and the Rise of the State*, 298.

¹² As argued by Wendt, in n3, above.

a connection, paradoxically enough, between war and its taming.¹³ For us in the West, the cycles of Mars can and should be interpreted as having trended toward a happy ending, such that it is virtually axiomatic to take the members of this geopolitical space to be denizens of a Kantian ‘zone of peace’,¹⁴ otherwise known as a (pluralistic) security community.¹⁵ But not all cyclical stories end so happily, and in the following section we turn our attention to a particularly lugubrious cyclical account, one that attracts more than a little attention today.

From Power transition to Hegemonic War?

One prominent source of pessimism concerning the future relations between the US and China stems from the keyboards of numerous analysts steeped in the power transition perspective. This is an analytical vantage point that emphasises a structural (and cyclical) impetus toward great power conflict in the international system. So let us, in this section, assess this gloomy point of departure, which, to say again, is practically welded at the hip to a cognate body of theorising associated with the notion of ‘hegemony’ – a notion that we are going to argue in this article’s following section is nothing if not vapid, and a notion that is long overdue for a decent burial by those who profess an interest in international security. But for the moment, we concentrate on the power transition theorists, for whom war is a likely consequence whenever ‘systemic change’ is said to be in the offing. By this kind of change is meant not a change *of* the international system, as happened, for instance, when the medieval order was held to have become transcended by the modern, Westphalian, state-system, a transcendence generally taken to have become effected at the latest by the middle of the seventeenth century; this is known as *systems change*, and constitutes the kind of alteration that occurs only rarely in history. Much more common is *systemic change*, in which ordering principles (viz., anarchy, with its related attributes of sovereignty and self-help on the part of the units) remain constant, but power (construed as relative capability) possessed by the divers entities composing the system becomes shuffled, so much so that sometimes the very ‘polarity’ of the latter alters, as for instance happened following the Second World War, when the balance-of-power system changed from multipolarity to bipolarity. With systemic change, there is a change *within* the system.¹⁶

¹³ An excellent source for the scholarly dispute over DPT is Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *Debating the Democratic Peace: An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch”, in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 93–130; and Kenneth N. Waltz, “Kant, Liberalism, and War”, *American Political Science Review* 56 (June 1962): 331–40.

¹⁵ On these entities see, Emanuel Adler and Michael N. Barnett, “Governing Anarchy: A Research Agenda for the Study of Security Communities”, *Ethics & International Affairs* 10 (1996): 63–98; and Karl Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

¹⁶ This distinction is drawn most clearly in Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 41–43.

Importantly, although systemic change can result in an alteration of polarity, it need not do this. The system might remain unaltered from the standpoint of its polarity, yet still be one in which a great deal of the latter kind of change (systemic) is occurring, as happened most famously during the long era of multipolarity, stretching from 1648 until the end of the Second World War. Multipolarity was a configuration in which there were always at least three roughly comparable great powers (and usually more than this number) vying for influence in the international system, and even though the structure of polarity was very long-lived, an enormous amount of change was underway, with momentous consequences for the units making up the system, to say nothing of the individuals living within those units. This is simply to say that power transition can be in operation either when polarity itself is up for grabs, as most recently happened when the disappearance of the Soviet Union resulted in the system's transformation from a bipolar to a unipolar one, or when the relative pecking order of multipolarity is shuffled, as it so often had been over the centuries spanning the Peace of Westphalia and 1945.

What makes power transition theory such an inducer of pessimism is the manner in which its adherents tend to freight it with deterministic qualities that complicate the chore of anyone seeking to falsify the theory. By this we mean that it possesses many of the attributes of a genuine 'spigot variable', such that no matter the direction in which one turns it, it can be counted upon to produce the same result, namely an outflow (in this case of conflict), even though the specific quality of that outflow will vary in degree – only not degree as measured by temperature of fluids, but rather by identity of system disturbers. The founding father of modern power transition theory is usually considered to be A. F. K. Organski, who during the early post-Second World War decades sent a clear message of despair to those analysts, 'realist' though many of them might otherwise have been, who preferred to detect in the 'balance-of-power' a structure that inclined the system toward equilibrium and general (though hardly ubiquitous) peace. Organski thought differently, and rather than wishing power to be balanced in the pursuit of peace, he saw in attempts to offset the relative capabilities of the most powerful state in the system nothing but trouble ahead. This, he said, was because of the insatiable lust for advantage evinced by the powers bent on supplanting the system's dominant state. Thus it was the appetite of the 'revisionist' challenger that would lead to conflict, because '[w]ars occur when a great power in the secondary position challenges the top nation'.¹⁷

Now turn the spigot of power transition in the other direction, which results in the same outflow – conflict – but yields a different culprit. Rather than the revisionist challenger upsetting the apple cart and bringing about the end of peace and stability, it is the upholder of the status quo who is most likely to resort to force in defence of interests. With the gap narrowing between number one and number two, the likelihood grows of a conflict between them. Only for this other sort of power

¹⁷ A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968; orig. pub. 1958), 364.

transition theorist, the relevant factor is not the zeal of the challenger to make further gains but rather the anxiety of the challenged, bent upon forestalling the rival's rise. How to do this? By launching preventive (or preventative) war. Unlike the case of Organski, who saw the moment of greatest danger to be precisely when the margin of power between dominant state and challenger was narrowing to the point of parity (hence his metaphor of war as a 'rear-end collision'), for many power transition theorists it is most likely that war will result well before parity is reached, and will do so because the dominant state knows that its security is inherent in its ability to smite its rival not when the latter is too strong, but rather when it remains sufficiently weak to lead to the expectation that a war that one would ordinarily prefer not to fight might nevertheless become a war that one will have been glad to have fought. In the words of Jack Levy, preventive war is 'an action against a particular adversary now, rather than running the risk of a more costly war against the same adversary later'.¹⁸

One should never confuse preventive war with pre-emptive war, although it is easy to see why so often this is exactly what is done. Part of the problem is inherent in mere sloppiness of the kind one at times encounters in the domain of security studies – for instance, when many analysts give the impression that they do not know of, or care to recognise, any important differences between 'collective defence' and 'collective security', and blithely employ the terms synonymously!¹⁹ Sometimes, however, the distinction between the two variants of war is deliberately fudged for political purposes. A case in point of the latter, i.e., of the deliberate conflation of the two sorts of war, came with the Iraq conflict in 2003, which clearly was launched in a bid to prevent Saddam Hussein from becoming more of a threat sometime in the future than he was adjudged to be at the time of the invasion. If the Iraq war had been a true case of pre-emption, then it could be imagined that Iraq's attackers were motivated chiefly because they believed in the imminence of an offensive thrust mounted by the Iraqis against them or their allies. Clearly, that 2003 conflict cannot be regarded as a 'great power' war, save under the loosest definition of the latter term; it did fit the bill as being a preventive one, and since this kind of war is generally argued to be 'illegal', to say nothing of its also being reckless (because of the open invitation that it extends to many actors to, in effect, strike while the iron is hot and nullify the threat they prefer to associate with certain adversaries), it is not difficult to see why those who might engage in such an enterprise like to have it be regarded as a pre-emptive war, something that can be justified with reference to the undisputed 'legal' right all states possess to self-defence.

When preventive war is linked to power transition dynamics, it becomes even more problematic, in light of the consequences embodied in the kind of conflict central to

¹⁸ Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War", *World Politics* 40 (October 1987): 82–107, quote at p. 85.

¹⁹ An indispensable source on the concept of collective security remains Inis L. Claude, *Swords into Plowshares: The Problems and Progress of International Organization*, 4th ed. (New York: Random House, 1971).

power transition logic, namely that between great powers. For preventive war conjures a show-down between number one and number two that is different from the rear-end collision envisioned by Organski. In this altered version of the peril inherent in power transition, it is not the revisionist upstart that is seen to be the culprit, but rather the systemic top dog. This variant of power transition theorising renders the most pessimistic expectation of consequences that must be expected to flow from the cyclical rise and decline of powers, as it throws the burden of war initiation not upon those (the revisionists) who have the most to gain by fighting, but on those (the top dogs) who have the most to lose by *not* fighting. Because it is assumed that the defence of what one possesses must always trump the desire to acquire something not yet obtained as a *casus belli*, some power transition theorists come to the confident conclusion that cyclical warfare can virtually be counted upon, and this because of the near-irresistible allure of preventive war. One such forecaster of foreboding, Sean Clark, has even tracked changes in a state's relative share of global GDP as a valuable indicator of the likelihood of great power war, with the overwhelming majority (nearly 70 percent) of such fighting having been instigated, he claims, by the declining power rather than the rising one.²⁰

This emphasis upon economic determinants of both relative capability and looming systemic change is telling, for it goes to the heart of the question of hegemonic war, which we argued above is not only intimately related to the cyclical pessimism of power transition theory but also a particularly mischievous notion, because of the manner in which the root concept, 'hegemony', gets articulated and operationalised. Before we elaborate below, in the next section, on the terminological and other problems raised by hegemonic war theorists, a word or two seem to be in order regarding the mooted linkages drawn between economic variables and systemic change resulting from power transition. It has been remarked that power transition theory is, at its root, a derivative of economic theorising. If this is so, it applies even more to the related notion of hegemonic warfare, as articulated most notably by Robert Gilpin. To Gilpin and some other theorists, the very source of power's 'transiting' is to be found in differential rates of economic growth. As a result of what is termed the inevitable 'uneven growth' of states, power (again, construed as relative capability) must also, and ineluctably, change.²¹

Charles Doran spells out the stages leading inexorably from uneven growth to great power conflict. As an economy grows, the state that presides over it experiences an increase in its power (*ceteris paribus*, of course, because as Fareed Zakaria has demonstrated, the state must first be in a position such that it can effectively tap societal wealth for the purpose of state-ordained policy).²² Not only can a state thus

²⁰ Sean Clark, "Deadly Decay: Great Power Decline and Cataclysmic War", *International Journal* 65 (Spring 2010): 475–94.

²¹ Gilpin, *War and Change*, passim. Also see, for this logic, Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise", *International Security* 17 (Spring 1993): 5–51.

²² Zakaria labels his own theory "state-centric realism". See his *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

growing *do* more, it can and does *want* to do more; its appetite swells with the eating, as it discovers its interests expanding in rough proportion to the increase in its capabilities. Those expanded interests, in turn, require greater capacities to defend them. But as its military assets increase in number and effectiveness, it triggers a 'security dilemma' whereby other states, incapable of perceiving whether it is expanding for defensive or offensive purposes, assume the worst, and adjust their own thinking, and planning, accordingly.²³

In this view, it matters less whether it is a rising or a declining state that initiates conflict, for the latter is more or less a function of foreordained systemic pressures. Still, some have argued that political agency might play a role in dampening these systemic proclivities toward conflict, to the extent that the world economy can become endowed with a 'hegemon'. What this means is that some state must be able and willing to take over the job of system manager, and in order to preserve the gains of the many (as well as of itself), it must at times assume certain costs falling to it and it alone, as for instance those associated with one task said to rank as the *sine qua non* of successful management, namely the provision of a market (its own) for 'distressed goods', subsumed in a related thought that the so-called hegemon must maintain the global economy's vitality by serving as its 'market of last resort'. Failing to step up to this particular plate, it is often argued, is to generate the risk of global depression and with it, global political conflict, i.e., war.²⁴

It is often assumed by the general public, and it is by necessity *invariably* assumed by scholars who labour in the vineyards of 'hegemonic stability theory', that what applies to the global economy must, *a fortiori*, apply to the international political system. Gilpin and others theorise (and at times have come close to prophesying) a kind of conflict labelled 'hegemonic war' that can easily yield not only pessimistic assumptions about the future, but downright cataclysmic ones as well. After all, what can be more daunting a prospect than that of hegemonic war, when this is regarded as being virtually synonymous with a titanic fight to the finish between the system's top dog and its top challenger? But our claim is that many of the direst assumptions linking power transition and this most dramatic kind of conflict need to be taken with a large grain of salt, and in the section below we explain why.

The Impossibility of Hegemonic War

The place to start is with the choice of words employed by theorists of cyclical cataclysm, especially the master concept, 'hegemony'. Taken in the restricted domain of the international political economy (IPE), there need be nothing particularly objectionable about the word. After all, some state has to provide the 'key currency'

²³ Charles Doran, "War and Power Dynamics: Economic Underpinnings", *International Studies Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1983): 419–41.

²⁴ The best-known proponent of this argument is Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

employed in the system, serving to fulfill the most important and necessary functions of an ‘international’ currency – namely providing liquidity, a store or value, and a measure of value. And since it is generally conceded that the US dollar, *faute de mieux*, does all of these things, then if one implication of hegemony is ‘influence’, surely it would be pointless to claim that the dollar lacked clout, tales of US economic ‘decline’ to the contrary notwithstanding. If another implication of hegemony is ‘leadership’, then once again the word seems to fit with international monetary realities, all the more so as the domestic entity charged with overseeing the US currency, the Federal Reserve, need drop but the slightest of hints regarding its unwillingness to keep pumping liquidity into the system, say by restricting the quantity of bonds it intends to purchase (the practice known as ‘quantitative easing’), and currency values around the world can come under downward pressure, as is happening as we write these lines.²⁵

The problem arises when hegemony is utilised as an explanatory, or even merely a descriptive, concept in discussions of international *security*. Despite its widespread misapplication, it really does not travel all that well, and mainly this is due to the well-known lack of ‘fungibility’ of assets contained within the inventory of a state’s ‘hard power’.²⁶ This lack means that something capable of inspiring desired behaviour on the part of others in one issue-area, say that of monetary relations between states, may not attain the same outcome in other issue-areas, especially those relating to our own article’s problématique, involving questions of war and peace. To put it in a nutshell, using hegemony either in its strong version, as control over outcomes (otherwise known as ‘influence’), or in its weak version, where it stands for a somewhat ineffable quality known as ‘leadership’, is empirically so problematical as to yield only one conclusion: the term should be eschewed by those whose business it is to describe and explain patterns of behaviour in the international *political* system, above all on those matters linked to security. The point should be so obvious as to need no restating here, but sometimes the obvious cannot be said often enough: neither America nor any other state really gets it way very much of the time when it comes to dealings with other members of the states systems – and not just the most powerful such members.

Consider merely the illustrative example of US relations with North Korea: surely, if ever there were a tandem expected to yield predictable results, then it would be this particular elephant-and-mouse dyad. Washington’s wish, should the US truly *be* a hegemon, should be Pyongyang’s command. This is not say that America has no

²⁵ Nathaniel Popper, “Economic Shifts in U.S. and China Batter Markets”, *New York Times*, 25 January 2014, A1, B7; Binyamin Appelbaum, “Fed Again Scales Back Purchases of Bonds”, *ibid.*, 30 January 2014, B1, B6.

²⁶ For reasons we have never understood, European analysts frequently miscategorise economic prowess as falling outside the ambit of “hard power”, and this notwithstanding that none other than the guru of “soft power” himself, Joseph Nye, was explicit in writing that this latter, stemming from such power resources as “culture, ideology, and institutions,” stood in contrast with the “hard power usually associated with tangible resources like military and economic strength”. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 32.

arrows in its diplomatic quiver suitable for unleashing in the Hermit Kingdom's direction, for that is even more absurd than claiming that the US is 'hegemonic' in its dealings with North Korea. But it is to remark upon the fundamental difficulties one administration after another has encountered in trying either to coerce or cajole North Korea into compliant behaviour. Now, it has been remarked by some writers that while the US may not be a 'global' hegemon, it can still be thought of as a regional one.²⁷ Even in this restricted sense, however, there is more wrong with the hegemon descriptor than right with it: witness simply two cases in America's 'near abroad', namely Cuba and Venezuela. In respect of either country, hegemony taken as control over outcomes or merely simply as leadership would seem to be an analytical stretch. As for the rest of Latin America, it is hard to see that the important story in this part of the world involves either how Washington usually gets its way (it does not), or how it inspires region-wide 'followership' on the part of the republics of South and Central America (it does not).

Partly, hegemony is employed out of sloppiness, the same failing we noted earlier in admonishing analysts never to confuse collective security with collective defence. But partly, hegemony is thought to be a meaningful concept in international security relations because it seems to fit within debates over the international system's structure. This is particularly so when thoughts turn to the manner in which we should label that system in the aftermath of the Cold War and of the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself. In short, what is happening is that many analysts are prepared to believe that hegemony is and must be a logical corollary of systemic structure, such that if the latter is deemed to be 'unipolar', it must follow that the dominant power in such a system, the US, must be 'hegemonic'.

Is this really so? For starters, let us say what unipolarity means, descriptively. It has a simple connotation, best expressed by William Wohlforth more than a decade ago: 'Unipolarity is a structure in which one state's capabilities are too great to be counterbalanced'.²⁸ By this he meant counterbalanced by a single 'peer competitor', either on its own or at the head of a counter-hegemonic grouping actively pursuing a balancing strategy. Clearly, the US in and of itself does not possess more than 50 percent of the planet's aggregate capabilities across the broad range of what might be considered the 'elements of power'. As such, it is conceivable that it could be balanced through a) the robust and sustained growth of an existing state; b) the establishment of a new and powerful entity possessed of statist features and with outsized geopolitical aspirations; or c) an unambiguously counterbalancing alliance of states that, on their own, hold no prospect of becoming America's 'peer competitor'.

As we glance at the international system, it occurs to us that while unipolarity may still (for how long?) be a useful descriptor of its structure, there is precious little reason

²⁷ An argument advanced, inter alios, by John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

²⁸ William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World", *International Security* 24 (Summer 1999): 5–41, quote at p. 9.

to deduce therefrom any arguments regarding hegemony; the two simply are not correlative terms. It strikes us that what David Wilkinson argued at the end of the 1990s remains equally the case today: there is no correlation between the structural arrangement of global security (unipolarity), and the claims regarding foreign policy orientation and capability (hegemony). In short, we are living in a time of non-hegemonic unipolarity, the duration of which is impossible to predict. If anyone is tempted to conclude that Wilkinson must be trafficking in oxymorons (or hallucinatory chemicals) then he or she is invited to read (or re-read) Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and ponder the plight of Lemuel Gulliver, which if not identical in all respects with today's America as it plans and tries to execute its foreign policy agenda, is a reasonable enough facsimile thereof.²⁹

One might be tempted to say simply that hegemonic war must be an impossibility merely on terminological grounds, given that for this kind of warfare to hover in our future there must exist hegemony ripe for dethroning. There is, however, another reason, logical more than terminological in nature, which leads us to downplay the spectre of a coming hegemonic conflict. If such variant of power transition tension is, as we noted above, most often associated with the dominant state's desire to preserve advantage even if it means launching a preventive war, presumably policymakers in the leading power (let us call it the 'unipole', or even better, perhaps, the 'primate') sense that the privileges it enjoys under unipolarity are such as to virtually compel even the strongest measures adopted in their defence. According to this logic, or so it is often assumed, primacy is its own reward.

But is it? Not according to a recent analysis performed by Daniel Drezner, who tells us that the benefits (if that is what they are) of being number one may not be worth the costs entailed in their acquisition or preservation. In fact, Drezner comes close to saying that primacy is a mug's game, especially if the emphasis is upon *military* primacy, which of course is what usually comes to mind when unipolarity is assessed largely (though obviously not entirely) as a function of military capability. Generally, proponents of America's retaining military primacy stress a trio of important benefits that they say flow from primacy – benefits that Drezner terms 'geoeconomic' and 'geopolitical' favouritism, as well the general gain in welfare associated with the provision of 'collective goods'. On all three counts, Drezner adjudges the costs associated with military primacy, not least being the economic costs, to be far in excess of any gains. More than this, he argues that to the extent excessive spending on the military actually degrades America's economic prospects by misdirecting scarce investment dollars away from more productive domestic applications, the pursuit of military primacy operates at cross-purposes to the only kind of primacy that truly matters, 'full-spectrum' primacy, including and especially economic pre-eminence.³⁰

²⁹ David Wilkinson, "Unipolarity Without Hegemony", *International Studies Review* 1 (Summer 1999): 141–72, cite at p. 143.

³⁰ Daniel W. Drezner, "Military Primacy Doesn't Pay (Nearly As Much As You Think)", *International Security* 38 (Summer 2013): 52–79.

Similarly cautioning, though for a different reason, against the tendency to imagine primacy to be a marvellous advantage to America is Martha Finnemore, who claims that there are structural features of unipolarity that undercut the ability of the 'unipole' to lead (and, recall, 'leadership' is said to be a defining characteristic of the weak understanding of hegemony discussed above). For sure, domestic missteps also plague the unipole in its quest to translate structural position into policy gain, but added to these, Finnemore states, are three 'social forces' at work that combine to limit the unipole's ability to get its way. The first of these forces is the unipole's need for legitimisation of its policies; the second is the self-induced pressure it feels for institutionalising its policy preferences; and the third, really a function of how to respond to the first two sets of forces, is the growing temptation to resort to hypocrisy. 'Actors inconvenienced by social rules often resort to hypocrisy proclaiming adherence to rules while busily violating them. Such hypocrisy obviously undermines trust and credible commitments but the damage runs deeper: hypocrisy undermines respect and deference both for the unipole and for the values on which it has legitimised its power.'³¹

In sum, hegemonic warfare – that most beastly of all postulated challenges on the global security horizon – turns out not to be such a monstrous threat, after all. Not only is it a nominal impossibility, but more importantly, what is called 'hegemonic warfare' overstates the value the top dog places on being number, and by extension overemphasises the risks of preventive war conducted with the aim of striking the rising power before it becomes too strong to smite. There is one further claim to be made against the spectre of hegemonic war, involving the manner in which the Cold War drew to an end. We turn now to this last point, in our conclusion.

Conclusion: What the Cold War's Ending Tells Us about the Future

The annals of power transition theorising can make for dismal reading, assuming one ascribes to the probabilistic consequence (war), the 'cause' insisted upon by this variant of cyclical theorising (systemic change). Indeed, if one is committed to the logic of power transition, the number of instances in which it can be claimed that peace rather than war ensued from systemic change is so small as to be expressed with the digits of one hand – and not all five of them, either. In this regard, it is common for analysts to identify only one prominent case of which it can be said that number one faced a challenger, but rather than have to go to war with number two, it accommodated its 'rise' in such a manner as to not only ensure it was a peaceful one, but that it could be tapped to the advantage of the dominant power, at least for a period of time. That happy experience, of course, was subsumed in what has been

³¹ Martha Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn't All It's Cracked Up to Be", *World Politics* 61 (January 2009): 58–85, quote at pp. 60–61.

called, with reason, the ‘great rapprochement’ between Britain and America at the end of the nineteenth century.³²

No wonder this case continues to serve as inspiration for some contemporary scholars, who ponder the future of Sino–American relations,³³ all the more so given the more frequent references that are made so regularly to another dyadic relationship of a century or so ago with a less fortunate outcome, the rivalry between Britain and Germany.³⁴ But the Anglo–American rapprochement of a century ago, however welcome it might be for those seeking to dispel the general gloomy aspect of most power transition theorising, is not really of particular significance to the argument we have been making here. Much more relevant is the way which the Cold War came to a halt: with a whimper not a bang.

The Cold War can be hypothesised as the closest thing to a great power conflict the world has known during the six-decades’ long nuclear age; certainly Gilpin’s 1981 book, with its pessimistically constructed hints about the dangers of uneven growth, tended to put readers on the *qui vive* for impending conflict – quite unlike a contemporary work by another ranking IR realist theoretician, Kenneth Waltz, whose 1979 treatise, *Theory of International Politics*, struck a much more upbeat note, and discerned in bipolarity close to the very opposite of what Gilpin descried: stability and the preservation of peace, rather than looming instability and possible conflict.³⁵

Neither Gilpin nor Waltz could know when they were writing what we have known for a quarter-century now: that the bipolar competition would not result in war. And that it did not result in global conflagration, while surely owing to a multitude of factors, might be said primarily to have been the outcome of the cyclical process with which we began our article, namely that reflected in sequential military revolutions. In particular, we argue that the military revolution ushered in by the development of nuclear weapons was to have a transformative impact upon the mooted linkages drawn by power transition theorists, including and especially in the most dramatically

³² Bradford Perkins, *The Great Rapprochement: England and the United States, 1895–1914* (New York: Atheneum, 1968). For the varying ways in which this rapprochement has been interpreted, theoretically as well as historically, see Stephen R. Rock, *Why Peace Breaks Out: Great Power Rapprochement in Historical Perspective* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Charles A. Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Kathleen Burk, *Old World, New World: Great Britain and America from the Beginning* (New York: Grove Press, 2009); Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815–1908* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Harry Cranbrook Allen, *The Anglo-American Relationship since 1783* (London: Black, 1959); Charles S. Campbell, Jr., *From Revolution to Rapprochement: The United States and Great Britain, 1783–1900* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974); and Robert Balmain Mowat, *The Diplomatic Relations of Great Britain and the United States* (London: E. Arnold, 1925).

³³ Feng Yongping, “The Peaceful Transition of Power from the UK to the US”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1 (2006): 83–108.

³⁴ An analogy that was most recently invoked by Japan’s prime minister, Shinzo Abe, who told a high-level economic gathering at Davos that his country’s current tense relationship with China looked like nothing so much as the relationship Britain had with Germany in 1914. Andrew Ross Sorkin, “Anxiety Rises Over Japan and China’s Relations”, *New York Times*, 28 January 2014, B1, B8.

³⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

elaborated version of the logic, expressed by hegemonic war theory. To phrase it a bit more formulaically, we can say that during the nuclear era the observable cases of great power rivalry construed as instances of potential or genuine power transition number are very few in number. Moreover, the cases that we can definitively pronounce to have been concluded – and how else should we construe the US–USSR rivalry subsequent to the disappearance of the USSR? – number only one. Thus for our observations, we have an ‘n’ of 1, and its outcome confutes rather than sustains the assumptions of power transition theory.

In closing, we note the irony here, of one cyclical dynamic trumping another such dynamic. For if the central question concerning global security in the twenty-first century really is to be one asking whether the US and China are destined for a showdown as a result of power transition suppositions, then the Cold War’s ending of 25 years ago offers better guidance than anything else we currently possess as to the likelihood of a brawl to the finish between China and America. The cycles of Mars end up giving more support to the cycles of the baseball diamond than to the cycles of power transition, applying a different but not unwelcome gloss to the meaning of ‘what goes ‘round, comes ‘round’.