

TEN PROPOSITIONS REGARDING GREAT POWER POLITICS

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The global distribution of power is changing; as a result, China and Russia pose the biggest security challenges to the United States. In short, after a 30-year hiatus, great power politics are back and with them, conflict and, perhaps, great power war. Given the stakes, we offer 10 propositions:

1. In international politics, there is no harmony of interests.

The individual interests of states take precedence over the common interest of peace. In his foundational realist text, E. H. Carr describes an absent-minded faith by the victors of World War I in the possibility for a harmony of interests across the globe. In this faith, Western leaders projected their opinion onto the rest of the world “that war profits nobody . . . and that an intellectual grasp of this fact was all that was necessary to induce the nations to keep the peace in the future.”¹ One looks no further than the utopian notion of the democratic peace proposition to identify present conceptions of this idea.

Presumably democratic states, like firms in a collusive market, are hard wired for cooperation, at least among themselves.² But unlike laissez-faire economists who assume the economic interests of the world are identical with the common interests of the state, the politician assumes the interests of the state are identical with the interests of the world.³ Extending this to the high politics of war and peace, the assumption there is a world interest in peace that is compatible with the interest of each individual state overlooks the fact that some great powers desire to uphold the status quo and some desire to change it.

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1. E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 51–52.

2. See Zeev Maoz and Bruce Russett, “Normative and Structural Causes of the Democratic Peace, 1946–1986,” *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993); John M. Owen, “How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace,” *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1994); and Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Democratic Peace—Warlike Democracies? A Social Constructivist Interpretation of the Liberal Argument,” *European Journal of International Relations* 1, no. 4 (1995).

3. Carr, *Twenty-Years Crisis*, 51–52.

2. Great powers are different than the rest.

Great powers must deal with all the world all the time; they have robust economies, generally capable militaries, and worldwide interests.⁴ It is the lack of a world government to resolve disputes between states that drives great powers to help themselves according to their interests.⁵ To protect themselves in this anarchic world, great powers seek to build their influence, resources, and territories, which inevitably threatens the security of other states, generating a security dilemma.⁶

Because of their power and position, great powers cannot afford to overlook any part of the international system—doing so puts them at risk of becoming vulnerable to the designs and influence of the other great powers. Thus, great powers have a responsibility to manage the international system. They do this by managing their relations with one another and the other states in the system simultaneously, even if they would prefer not to, which is one reason why they tend to fight more wars than most.⁷ In short, great powers “usually lead troubled lives.”⁸

3. International political systems are “individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintended.”⁹

International political systems are individualist in the sense they are formed by the interactions of self-interested states, spontaneous in that they are the result of the uneven distribution of power throughout the world, and unintended in that the uneven distribution of power produces second- and third-order effects that become constraints over time. Put simply, no great power intends to create an international system that constrains them, but that is the result.¹⁰ One looks no further than the Cold War to grasp this idea.

After World War II, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union intended to create a bipolar system that constrained them, but that is what emerged.¹¹ For nearly 50 years, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic had to consider the possible reactions of the other to every move and countermove. Today, as a multipolar system emerges, the

4. Alfred Zimmern, *Spiritual Values and World Affairs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 32.

5. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001).

6. Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978).

7. See George Modelski, “War and the Great Power System,” in *War: A Historical, Political, and Social Study*, ed. L. L. Farrar Jr. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1972); Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983), 4; Bear F. Braumoeller and Austin Carson, “Political Irrelevance, Democracy, and the Limits of Militarized Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 2 (2011).

8. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 187.

9. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 90.

10. Waltz, 90.

11. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 171; Charles W. Kegley and Gregory A. Raymond, “Must We Fear a Post-Cold War Multipolar System?,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 3 (1992); and Dale Copeland, “Neorealism and the Myth of Bipolar Stability: Toward a New Dynamic Theory of Major War,” *Security Studies* 5, no. 3 (1996).

cause is the same: the uneven redistribution of power.¹² Will it result in a new Cold War? Time will tell.¹³

4. Great powers are sensitive to competition; strategic competition stems from international systems that condition behaviors.

Three types of international systems exist: unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar. In unipolar systems, one great power dominates the rest. Competition is monopolistic and political leaders need not be sensitive to anyone or any body politic, making overextension the behavior to be avoided. Overextension unnecessarily wastes resources, hastening the rise of other great powers. In bipolar systems where the nature of great power competition stems from the actions of two great powers, political leaders must be sensitive to the actions and responses of other great powers. Here, overreaction is the behavior to be avoided.

Overreaction can unnecessarily escalate local conflicts to global levels with harmful effects. The United States' experience over the last three decades has been one of monopolistic competition. The Clinton and Bush administrations often draw criticism for their adventurous foreign policies, but overwhelming US power conditioned these policy decisions, releasing them from any real concern for the interests and desires of other states.¹⁴

In multipolar systems where three or more great powers compete for power, the nature of competition is oligopolistic; political leaders must be sensitive to the interests of other members in the group. Due to myriad variables, uncertainty regarding great power responsibilities is highest and the game itself is not easily understood; any miscalculation by any member of the group affects the other members in the group. Overconfidence must be avoided. For Waltz, overconfidence is the more menacing of the possibilities, since it "is more likely to permit the unfolding of a series of events that finally threatens a change in the balance and brings the powers to war."¹⁵

On the other hand, overreaction under bipolarity "is the lesser evil because it costs only money and the fighting of limited wars."¹⁶ That said, one thing is certain: No two powers want to take an action that would weaken them while enhancing the power of

12. See John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990); Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993); Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012); and Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008).

13. See Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); Christopher Layne, "Coming Storms: The Return of Great-Power War," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2020); and Charles Kupchan, "Bipolarity Is Back: Why It Matters," *Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2021).

14. See G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996).

15. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 172.

16. Waltz, 172.

the third. Add thermonuclear weapons to the group, and any conflict among members becomes acute.¹⁷

5. Great powers rise and fall endlessly.

In 1700, there were seven great powers in the world. 100 years later, there were five; 100 years after that, eight, but by 1945, only two remained. This was followed by a period of unipolarity that lasted from 1989 to 2005.¹⁸ Interestingly, in nearly every instance, international systemic change was the result of great power war (with, of course, the famous exception of 1991).¹⁹ Such wars involve the dominant powers in an international system and the rising challengers.²⁰

The fundamental issue at stake is the nature and governance of the system itself, which is why great power wars—or hegemonic ones—are fought with unlimited means. As Marshal Ferdinand Foch summarized the changing character of war in 1917, the new wars of existential and global interests “were to absorb into the struggle all the resources of the nation, which were to be aimed not at dynastic interests, not at the conquest or possession of a province, but at the defense or spread of philosophic ideas first, of principles of independence, unity, immaterial advantages of various kinds afterwards.”²¹

Extending this logic further, the rise of China has not threatened the nature or governance of the contemporary international system sufficiently to warrant war. Will that hold? Perhaps. Much scholarship has been published debating whether China is a status quo or revisionist rising power, not to mention some questioning the utility of the classifications altogether.²² The point to be made here is whether the United States interprets China’s rise as a threat.

John Mearsheimer argues that as China’s economic prowess expands, its interests will expand with it, leading to efforts to place itself at the head of East Asian politics

17. See Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18, no. 2 (1993); Daniel Deudney, “Hegemony, Nuclear Weapons, and Liberal Hegemony,” in *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); John Lewis Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security* 10, no. 4 (1986); and Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

18. See Levy, *Great Power System*, 47–48; and Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 347–56.

19. See G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

20. See, for example, Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987); and Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

21. Ferdinand Foch, *The Principles of War*, trans. J. de Morinni (New York: H. K. Fly, 1918), 31.

22. Alistair Ian Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?,” *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003); Scott L. Kastner and Phillip C. Saunders, “Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State? Leadership Travel as an Empirical Indicator of Foreign Policy Priorities,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012); Ian Taylor and Zhangxi Cheng, “China as a ‘Rising Power’: Why the Status Quo Matters,” *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2022); and Alexander Cooley, Daniel Nexon, and Steven Ward, “Revising Order or Challenging the Balance of Military Power? An Alternative Typology of Revisionist and Status Quo States,” *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 4 (2019).

certain to spark balancing from the United States.²³ Far from the certainty of Mearsheimer's prediction, Evan Braden Montgomery argues convincingly that the likelihood of tension between a hegemon and a potential rising challenger turns—in part—on the type of order the challenger is interested in establishing in its sphere of influence.²⁴

The question under review is whether a hegemonic China would upend what is often referred to as the liberal international order and replace its components with institutions containing Chinese characteristics. Kori Schake intimates the unlikelihood of a peaceful power transition between the United States and China amounts to cultural incommensurability preventing the powers from trusting one another.²⁵ Still, there are those who argue from a rational perspective that in light of the geopolitical environment, there is no reason that China would pursue a new order-building strategy in East Asia.²⁶ This debate is unlikely to be resolved any time soon.

Hegemonic wars are not inevitable, but dominant powers are left with few options when confronted by a challenger. Declining hegemons can try to expand their economic base by creating new markets or retrench by cutting back foreign policy commitments.²⁷ And while preferable to war, neither choice is easy, which is one reason why war has been prevalent among the great powers.

6. Interdependence does not mean peace.

Interdependence is the order of the day.²⁸ Broadly defined, it refers to the idea that change in one part of the world is felt in all others. In narrower terms, interdependence is an economic concept the impacts of which are expressed in terms of the pacifying effects of trade. The key characteristic of an interdependent relationship is that the autonomy of each actor is constrained by the necessary estimation of the costs of any action. States would rather trade than invade—or so enthusiasts say. But is this accurate?

World trade doubled between 1870 and 1900, and immediately prior to World War I, European trade grew another 50 percent.²⁹ The European core's (including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) level of exports and imports ranged from 30 to 59 percent of total gross domestic product.³⁰ And yet war came. Will it come again?

23. John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160–62.

24. Evan Braden Montgomery, *In the Hegemon's Shadow* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

25. Kori Schake, *Safe Passage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

26. Jonathan Kirshner, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 1 (2012).

27. Kirshner, "Offensive Realism."

28. See Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 2012).

29. David M. Rowe, "World Economic Expansion and National Security in Pre-World War I Europe," *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (1999).

30. Mariko J. Klasing and Petros Milionis, "Quantifying the Evolution of World Trade, 1870-1949," *Journal of International Economics* 92, no. 1 (2014).

Certainly, much has changed since 1914.³¹ International institutions like the World Trade Organization abound, and trade between the great powers has never been higher. Richard Rosecrance notes the tendency of states after 1945 to pursue trading strategies over those of territorial acquisition.³² Trying to dispel confusion, Dale Copeland argues it is the expectation of future trade that staves off war, but states can be pushed to war when facing the potential for losing the benefits of future trade.³³ Russia's recent willingness to risk economic isolation from Europe as a response to its invasion of Ukraine suggests this debate is far from resolution. Are institutions and trade sufficient to alleviate the acute conflicts that inevitably arise among great powers? These are questions worth pondering.

7. Prestige is the currency of everyday international politics.³⁴

Prestige can be measured in terms of credibility. More specifically, the credibility of a state's power is defined by its ability to deter and compel others. The hierarchy of prestige in international politics serves an authority function. The most prestigious states are on top, the less so at the bottom. Interestingly, the eras of relative peace in the world are associated with a clearly understood prestige hierarchy. This notion squares with Geoffrey Blainey's argument that war is the result of disagreements about the balance of power.³⁵ These disagreements follow from contrasting perceptions of capability.

Logically, if no contrasting perspectives exist, peace should endure. One looks no further than the unipolar period of 1989–2005 to grasp this idea. For a relatively brief period, the US economy and military sat so far atop the hierarchy that it made the idea of great power war appear quaint. In this moment of unipolarity as William Wohlforth described, balancing coalitions were impossible.³⁶

This is no longer the case today. In parts of the developing world, some think China's economy has surpassed that of the United States, generating a competition for prestige between the two great powers.³⁷ If an unambiguous prestige hierarchy is associated with a stable international order, this is not encouraging. Misunderstanding or misperceiving shifts in the prestige hierarchy can lead declining hegemons to make rash and consequential decisions.³⁸

31. See Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller, eds., "A Century after Sarajevo: Reflections on World War I," *International Security* 39, no. 1 (2014).

32. Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

33. Dale Copeland, "Economic Interdependence and War: A Theory of Trade Expectations," *International Security* 20, no. 4 (1996).

34. See Gilpin, *World Politics*; Yuen Foong Khong, "Power as Prestige in World Politics," *International Affairs* 95, no. 1 (2019); Jonathon Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Jonathan Mercer, "The Illusion of International Prestige," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (2017).

35. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988); and Gilpin, *World Politics*, 31.

36. William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (1999).

37. Khong, "Power as Prestige."

38. Gilpin, *World Politics*, 14.

8. With great power comes great responsibility.

To think in these terms is to think of international order. International order refers to a pattern of activity that sustains the preservation of the society of states. This includes those goals essential for the sustainment of international life such as the limitation of violence, the keeping of promises, and the possession of property.³⁹ Great powers are invested in preserving the society of states because it often benefits their growth and sustains their power.⁴⁰ They exploit their preponderance of power in such a way as to give general direction to the affairs of the international system.

Great powers do this by creating legitimate international orders. Legitimate orders are ones in which members willingly participate and agree with the overall orientation of the system.⁴¹ Once in place, these orders tend to facilitate the further growth of international institutions.⁴² One need look no further than the Anglo-American alliance.⁴³ After World War II, the democracies made a commitment to building institutions that would buttress open markets, economic security, multilateral cooperation, and common security.⁴⁴ The US constitutional order-building strategy after 1945 cultivated a reputation for benignity, making it easier for states to opt in. Today these ideals are under attack. Will they persist? If so, the institutions created through this order will be one reason why.

9. International institutions are power politics by other means.

By institution we do not imply an organization or administrative apparatus. Rather, international institutions refer to habits and practices in line with common goals. The balance of power, international law, and diplomacy are all institutions that wield considerable power.⁴⁵ These institutions dictate the ways rules are “communicated, administered, interpreted, enforced, legitimized, adapted and protected” in international politics.⁴⁶

Such arrangements create deeper institutional linkages among states and make it difficult for alternative orders to replace existing ones. Thus, legitimate political orders are transformative ones, making their dissolution difficult if not impossible. Moreover, there is a functional imperative for strong states to cooperate and seek institutional solutions—they allow for the conservation of power itself. Great powers must make

39. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), chap. 1.

40. See Bull, *Anarchical Society*.

41. See Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*.

42. See Ernst Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950–1957* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

43. See Ikenberry, *After Victory*; and Richard Rupp, “NATO 1949 and NATO 2000: From Collective Defense toward Collective Security,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23, no. 3 (2000).

44. See Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*.

45. Bull, *Anarchical Society*.

46. Hidemi Suganami, “The International Society Perspective on World Politics Reconsidered,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 2, no. 1 (2002).

their commanding power positions more predictable and restrained by institutionalizing deliberative international practices.⁴⁷ In short, they are power politics by other means.

10. “The texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly.”⁴⁸

Today, three great powers vie for the world’s attention—China, Russia, and the United States. As daunting as this might appear, along with everything else noted above, multipolarity and oligopolistic competition are ordinary features of this type of international system. In short, we have seen all this before. Yet change is the watchword of the day, and as it is with watchwords, change often goes undefined.

It is not enough to claim the world has changed; one must specify exactly what in the world has changed. One hears claims that cyberspace is changing international politics, but it is also the case that international politics are changing cyberspace.⁴⁹ In a similar way, the interaction between space and international politics is affecting both. So long as the world is made of states invested in survival, the tendencies of international politics will continue. The space domain will be used much as the sea and air have been, as a way for states to project their power. In other words, great power politics are back and with them, conflict and, perhaps, war.

So long as anarchy is the organizing principle of international politics, Waltz notes, state relations will be marked by “dismaying persistence.”⁵⁰ The character of these relations is *persistent* because anarchy imposes constant uncertainty on great powers, inciting security dilemmas and balancing. This tendency is *dismaying* because the security dynamics of international politics are inescapable and marred by tragedy.

The recorded history of the world is replete with the birth and death dates of great powers.⁵¹ It would be a mistake to expect the future to be different. Of course this is not to suggest the behaviors of the great powers do not matter. It makes a difference to individuals if the Hitlers or the Putins of the world rule. Thus, we close with this: Take nothing for granted. Let us work to ensure the evils of men are not met with the power of the great powers. Æ

47. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 356.

48. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 66.

49. James W. Forsyth Jr. and Brandon E. Pope, “Structural Causes and Cyber Effects: Why International Order Is Inevitable in Cyberspace,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2014).

50. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 66.

51. See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

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