

## Theme 2

**National and Regional Security:  
Building Confidence, Inducing Cooperation****Charles Francis Doran**

The Andrew W. Mellon Professor of International Relations, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), USA

## Comments on Session 1

## PART I

According to the "transition" notion of international politics, only two states figure strongly in world politics, a dominant state or "hegemon," and a rising state, or "challenger." In the contemporary view, the United States is labeled as the hegemon, and China as the challenger. In this view of the transition advocates, when China overtakes the United States in power terms, China will try to impose its understanding of politics on the world. The resulting transition, it is argued, will lead to a major war. In some quarters, this simplistic understanding of world politics has gained great advocacy. However, this view has no resemblance to the actual dynamics of international relations and the true complexities of world order. What is wrong with this view?

First, huge uncertainty surrounds the actual trajectory of state power such that even the identity of the "challenger" is less than certain. The issues of "relative to whom," the type of the curve the state is following, and what growth rate is involved make prediction of a transition questionable. Only slightly more than a decade ago predictions were that Japan would become the next hegemon. Rates of growth for rapidly developing countries also decline sharply as they become large.

Second, relative power is composed of two dimensions, size and wealth. Even if China surpasses the United States at some future time in size, will it do so in terms of wealth? Quality of defenses is as important as quantity.

Third, despite assertions to the contrary, transitions in the past have not led to war. There is no sound empirical support for this claim of virtually inevitable war.

Fourth, in all of modern history, no controlling hegemon has ever existed in the central international system. Nor is the United States such a hegemon today. Nor in the future is China ever likely to become a hegemon imposing its will on the international system. Inability to resolve the North Korea problem, and inability to resolve the Taiwan problem, is evidence of the limits of the American role in determining behavior. Instead, in Asia for example, the United States is an "external balancer," preserving equilibrium and security by its presence, but in no sense determining specific international political outcomes.

Fifth, entirely missing from the transition view is the idea of balance and the role of the other leading states in the system. Indeed, by definition the transition advocates have rejected the notion of balance for it is conceptually incompatible with their idea of hegemony. Moreover, they have denied the positive role that the balance of power has played throughout history in preserving the nature of the decentralized nation-state system and the security of the major actors in that system. They have rejected the tenets of political realism. Such a partial understanding of world politics cannot stand analytically or as policy prescription.

Sixth, an understanding of the dynamics of international politics does exist which can account for structural change in the system and its consequences for world order. This perspective will be developed in the next session.

## Comments for Session 2

### PART II

While power inequalities do exist among states, the assumption of a single hegemon in each period of history is without support, much less of a hegemon imposing its will inside the central system. Rather, the dynamics of international relations and world order is pluralistic. States follow a "power cycle" of ascendancy and decline in terms of their relative power and, normally with a lag, of their foreign policy role - the "currency" of international politics. Differential levels and growth rates among states comprising the system set in motion a "single dynamic" of changing systemic share, reflected in the individual state power cycles. These relative power changes on the component power cycles together map the changing structure of the system across long periods of history. Each state's future power and role projections (expectations) are embedded in the evolving contour of its power cycle, as is the possibility that power and foreign policy role can get out of sync.

(1) Although specific trajectories of power cannot be predicted, the power cycle follows a pattern of rise to a peak (and likewise, of decline to a minimum) with properties of the asymmetric logistic, homologous to growth (decline) of populations in a limited environment. It is the bounds of the system, competition for share, which constrains the relative growth of each state, creating a structural undercurrent that contours the shape of foreign policy possibilities as it pulls the component states through their power cycles.

There are four "critical points" of a state power cycle where "everything changes" in structural terms for the state and the system. The state experiences an abrupt inversion in its future foreign policy expectations. Each critical point thus corresponds in the state's experience to a time when the "tides of history" have shifted in the system. Careful empirical research using differing data sets and methodologies has repeatedly shown that passage through these "critical points" so increases uncertainty and the sense of threat that the probability of major war is much greater

than in normal periods of history.

- (2) When a number of the leading states pass through critical points on their respective power cycles in about the same period of history, systems transformation occurs. The type of international system does not determine the degree of stability, and major war does not determine systems transformation. Transformation from one system causes major war. In each of the five major systems transformations historically in the modern international system, major war has occurred. Only in 1989, during the most recent (sixth) systems transformation from bipolarity to unipolarity, has peace prevailed.
- (3) In exposing contradictions between absolute and relative power dynamics, power cycle theory establishes the conflicting reality of each for international political behavior. Undercurrents of competition can counter and overwhelm even the strongest surge in absolute power growth. Even in the hour of its greatest achievement, a state can be pulled into relative decline by the tiny increases in absolute power of a much smaller but faster growing state.
- (4) What lessons does power cycle theory hold for China and for us? When the power of a state is considered relative to that of all of the other states in the central system, critical points of structural non-linearity do yield important results. At some time in the future, China will pass through its first critical point (or inflection point), when "everything will change" regarding its long-reinforced expectations of continued accelerated rise in power and foreign policy role. Its rate of relative power growth will slow down (even if its growth in absolute terms remains high), creating internal problems of equity and concerns about economic development, and external problems of adjustment in its expectations about a world role. This is an interval where outstanding foreign policy grievances become especially grave.

The experience at the beginning of the 20th century must not be repeated at the beginning of 21st century. In 1914, even as its absolute growth continued to surge, Germany realized that it had peaked in relative power and that Russia at the bottom of the central system was taking power share away from it. This anxiety contributed to the onset of World War One. Today, other states such as India will be responsible for taking power share away from China, thus causing China to slow the rate of increase in its relative power growth at the first inflection point on its power cycle. This difficult interval of history must be traversed with prudence and insight.

- (5) With proper skill and management on the part of state and system, China can traverse this difficult period without problems or instability. A dynamic international political equilibrium will hold. The system had failed to engage Germany in constructive foreign policy roles, leaving both Germany and the system severely disequibrated. Today, while maintaining adequate security provisions, the leading states in the system are pursuing the correct strategy of engagement toward China. Containment of rising power will not work. Nor will the artificial bolstering of declining power

---

achieve its aim. Strategies of balance, and of adaptation, must be properly matched to the dynamics of structural change.

In Asia, the United States will retain its role of "holder of the balance," even as China becomes relatively more powerful and attains a constructive role among the Great Powers.