



Historical Insights of Global Power Transitions: Implications on US-China Relations

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Abstract

The history of global power transitions is a complex and multifaceted topic that has far-reaching implications on various aspects of international relations, including US-China relations. Throughout history, there have been numerous instances where the balance of power between nations has shifted, leading to significant changes in the global order. This research is aimed to analyse the prospects and implications of the current global power transition. Since the relative decline of the United States and the rise of China, the US-China relationship is one of the recurring themes in international relations. The pace of rise of the rest, especially China, is shrinking the power gap between the United States and these competitors. This paper suggests that the United States has gone through a relative decline in its military, economic, and soft power capabilities. The current

trade war between the two largest economies, COVID-19 and other factors have exacerbated souring US-China relations. The realist theorists suggest that the 'rising states are always prone to provoke war', however, as China continues to increase its economic and military capabilities, the US has become increasingly wary of its rise and has adopted a more confrontational approach towards the country. This has led to a series of trade disputes, military tensions, and geopolitical conflicts between the two nations. The rise of China today is possible because of benefitting from the contemporary global order, but at the same time, China is dissatisfied with the role of the United States or a group of certain states in manipulating the laws of international institutions to pursue their self-interest. To avoid hostility, the largest economies should emphasize global issues by endorsing economic interdependence and cooperation.

Keywords: Current World Order, Geostrategic Competition, Global Power Transition, US-China Relations, US-China Trade War.

Introduction

Power transition is a crossover in a system when a rising country with specific attainment of political, military and economic power rises to challenge the status quo of a declining hegemon. While the power disparity is narrowing down, the United States and China have entered a phase that will bring consequences to shape the current order in the years ahead. Both countries could

engage in scuffles due to power disparity. Peace is well preserved when there is power parity and states are inclined to go to war because of power disparity in the system (Waltz, 1964). The realists argue that a period of transition in the system tends to the conditions which lead to hostilities. History is evident that rising contenders are often prone to provoke war against the established dominant power (Organski, 1958), and violent events take place because of the efforts when a dissatisfied rising competitor struggles to restructure while the existing power endeavours to preserve the present order (Levy, 2014). Wars between Napoleon and Britain, France and Prussia, the 100 Years' War, and World Wars I, & II are some examples (Kim, & Morrow, 1992). Though war is not in all the scenarios initiated by the dissatisfied revisionist power, the existing dominant power can also pre-empt war to refrain the challenger from attaining power status (Levy, 2014).

All countries in a system cannot be satisfied, they desire more power to ensure their security and promote interest, and a state enhances its power which leads to revisionism or restructuring of the global system (Mearsheimer, 2001). The period of power parity during the process of power transition between two powers is highly unpredictable to appropriately calculate their capabilities and will to acknowledge the intentions of one another (Reed, 2003). The choices made by these two countries will not only shape their bilateral relations but will shape globally the

prospects of peace, stability or instability. The prospects of global peace and bilateral relations would have comprised of two potential scenarios; centred on the realist viewpoint, rivals because of their differences could indulge in competition and conflicts while the second assumption is constructed as liberal institutionalists suggest, could be coexistence, interdependence and cooperation in a multilateral arrangement.

Various International Relations theories explain the relationship between the rising and relative declining power of a system. These theories do not cover the entire aspects of war and peace in a single situation. The purpose of this study is to be acquainted with the ongoing power shift that will be peaceful or overwhelmed by struggles. Second; this paper is carried out to emphasise the significant aspects of the current global power shift which are the core ground to supposedly affect turbulent episodes, and to highlight those measures when the established power could accommodate the rising contender. If the growing rival is pleased with the present system and the dominating power accommodates the would-be revisionist, the transition of power is expected to be peaceful. Further study can be conducted to indicate the measures of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of an impending competitor, and how the established global power endeavours to turn the satisfaction into dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction into the satisfaction of a rising competitor. Additional research can be done in future as well as the

progression of global transfer of power is yet to occur. The present-day assumptions could be materialised well once the process of power transition is accomplished.

Prospects of Peaceful Power Transition: Historical Retrospect

The United Kingdom was in decline in the last quarters of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries, while Germany in Europe and the United States in the Western Hemisphere were rising to threaten the then-global system that the United Kingdom had constructed. This was not financially possible for the United Kingdom to fulfil the requirements of its navy and army (Kennedy, 1983).

These two new emerging nations appeared to be unhappy with the contemporary order and hegemony of the United Kingdom. At the same time, the United Kingdom saw these emerging nations as enemies and threats. Both sides were now actively debating the probability of conflict between the US and the United Kingdom (Kennedy, 1987).

One of the major factors the United Kingdom chose to confront Germany and to pacify the United States was probably the closer proximity and immediate threat from Germany. Although the United States suggested a more difficult task than Germany for the United Kingdom. Compared to the United States, which has more resources and more sway over the Western hemisphere, it

was simpler for the United Kingdom to combat and overcome rising Germany because of its limited resources and fleet. The emerging power and the incumbent global power need not be at war, in contrast to the power transition paradigm (Kahler, 2013). However, the reason for the kinship war could not be eluded. The likelihood of taking place a peaceful current power transition could not be predicted, because; the established powers(s) do not anchor the peaceful intentions nor do the rising power(s) do so all the time (Hurrell, 2006).

Relevant Theories of International Relations and the Current Scenario

i. Hegemonic Stability Theory

Hegemonic Stability Theory -attributed to Charles Kindleberger while other major contributors are Robert Owen Keohane and Robert Gilpin- explains the system's stability and instability. A hegemon is a power having comparatively more material superiority over the other in a system. The prevailing single dominant supremacy in the international structure is responsible for the steadiness of the economic and political Structure (Kindleberger, 1981). The international system and the hegemon have a direct proportional connection. It is important to consider the role of the dominant power in the development of the liberal economic system.

The concept of hegemonic stability highlights the significance of the dominating power's function and presence in shaping the system's evolution. The effectiveness of the existing international institutions along with the multilateral cooperation amongst the countries can be guaranteed for the existence of the global order even if the dominant hegemon declines (Keohane, 2005).

Having the willpower to lead the international liberal economic system a hegemon power institutes a set of norms and rules to be followed by other committed powers, however, the decline of the hegemon causes the weakening of the system (Gilpin & Palan, 1987). It is widely accepted that the country or countries with the most power have a crucial responsibility to ensure that the global system remains stable and organized. This can be a difficult task, but it is essential to ensuring global security and promoting well-being. The hegemon power must be fair and just in their actions, and work tirelessly to maintain the stability of the system.

It is a great responsibility, but one that can have a positive impact on the world if done correctly. From the liberal perspective, the hegemon attributed to maintaining an open and stable international system should be satisfied (Kim, 1991). The set of norms and rules perceived by the committed states are equally beneficial for them and the international system as well. Having no central dominant hegemon power along with the other major-willing supporters the global system may tend to be anarchical. The predominant hegemon exercises to maintain and provide

support to the liberal economic order, lacking this, the system is unable to flourish (Kim, 1991). The foremost component of the theory is the dissemination of power amongst major stakeholders of the system.

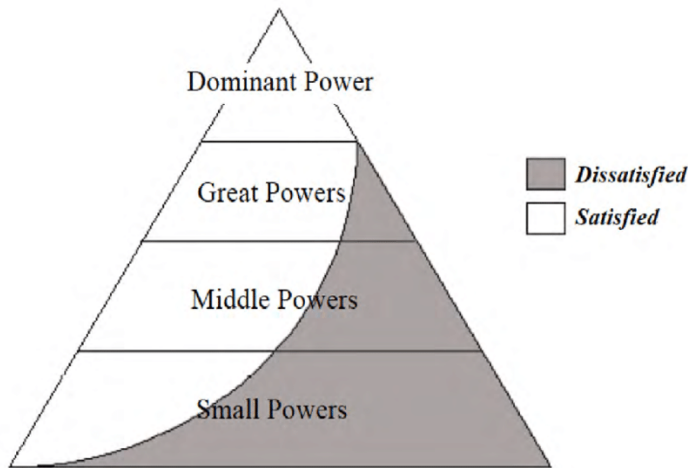
The hegemon power is strong enough to refrain from any potential threat posed to the stability of the global system by a transgressor country. The hegemon threatens the transgressor by inflicting penalties while on the other hand, it also provides incentives to the committed countries for strengthening and stability of the system. The hard power, soft power along with the prevalent economy and robust military power help a hegemon to establish its global hegemony. These resources also help a hegemon country to influence an international organization, however, without the support of a hegemon, these global institutions cannot operate efficiently. When the US withdrew to back the LN (League of Nations) went on non-functional.

When a country and its allies rise to match the strength of the current dominant power, they become the new challengers for that position and the overall global order. Bipolarity occurs because of such circumstances and the dissimilarities may lead them to ignite confrontation. The decline of the contemporary hegemon is substituted by the rising new hegemon, who ultimately restructures the existing global order by promulgating its own political, economic and security interests (Kim, 1991).

ii. Power Transition Theory

PTT is presented by Abramo Fimo Kenneth Organski in his book, *World Politics*, (1968) and was later fully elaborated by Organski & Kugler in *The War Ledger*, (1980). The disparity in power can preserve peace and stability while the balance of power inherits instability and war. The distribution of power structure in a system as the dominant power, middle power and small power is present regionally and globally. PTT argues that the global structure is hierarchical not anarchic, controlled by the dominant power, great powers followed by middle powers and colonies. The great powers are very few but the potential dissatisfied contender arises from this hierarchy who seeks to transmute the prevailing structure, however, most of the great powers are satisfied because their interests are well preserved by the system (Organski, 1968). According to PTT; a rising country is more likely to instigate conflict as far as it catches up with the dominant power.

Figure: Distribution of Power as Proposed by AFK Organski



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Global-Power-Hierarchy-The-dominant-power-is-seen-as-the-pre-eminent-international-power_fig1_333096960

The major focus of this theory is the great powers, their relations and conflicts but this model applies to the regional order as well. The distribution of power is spread unevenly at any level. Power is the capability of a state to force the other to act according to its wishes (Organski & Kugler, 1981). However, Ronald L. Tammen has elaborated that the power of a state is comprised of its population and economy while power is consolidated through the effective mobilization of these two factors by the government of a state (Tammen, 2000). In the vague of these definitions not only a dominant power can establish its prevailing power status but any other rising power can challenge the dominant power by efficiently mobilizing these three dynamics of power.

The dominant power in synergy with other great powers forms a global system where they operate to establish their status quo (Organski & Kugler, 1981). For a dominant power, it is advantageous to establish the global system with the willingness of the great power rather than to implement it forcefully. The committed great powers feel the system to preserve their prestige and explore their mutual benefits. According to PTT, the dissatisfied power(s) arise within the group of great powers when they become dissatisfied with the current state of affairs of the dominant power. The situation becomes more dangerous when the power parity is narrowing concerning the prevailing power and the growing dissatisfied power. If the dominant power and its allies are no longer capable or longer willing to preserve the existing global order. The dissatisfied growing power with the help of other impending dissatisfied rising powers seeks to bring certain reforms or attempt to transform the global system founded by the dominant power with its allies.

Statement of the Problem

It seems that the changing balance of power among nations is accelerating the current transition of global power. This is likely due to the emergence of various regional and global powers, while the United States may be experiencing a relative decline in its influence. The current shift in power will occur peacefully, strengthening mutual security and stability, as many experts in the field suggest that the United States can manage its fading

moment. These rising powers may help the established global power to address the global issues and on the other hand, may balance the threat perception posed by the US as a unipolar power. It is assumed that China will not seek to alter the present structure. Simultaneously, China is committed to enhancing the laws of the current global institutions.

Most of the previous transformations between the rising contenders and the weakening hegemons are comprised of struggles. If the United States indulges in conventional strategies of containment and China responds accordingly, the present power transition will end in catastrophe. As these two largest economies are entwined in economic interdependence and bilateral trade, souring relations will have universal profound effects on the economy, security and stability.

The above two assumptions are constructed by scrutinising the available literature. Still, this is ambiguous to conclude that the current shift in power will be peaceful or vicious. Based on the above two scenarios, this paper stresses, gauging the strategies of both countries towards one another, and evaluating the impacts and prospects of the ongoing latent power transition.

Research Objectives

- Available literature indicates the debate that the United States as a descending superpower is not new. The debate that the contemporary unipolar power is waning and China is

rising economically and militarily, recurred during and after the Great Recession of 2008 (Joffe, 2009). The objective of this work is to understand whether the process of the present shift in global power, the descent of the current world power and the ascent of China, is genuine or an overstated build-up has been set only.

- The recent circumstances in terms of US-China relations for global supremacy are exceptional. Events that previously occurred during a power shift and the existing theoretical explanations by the various International Relations theories at a time do not explain all the aspects of the phenomenon concerning the relationship between the US and China. Therefore, efforts are made to analyse the most relevant theories and available documents to originate a conclusion about the situation.
- It can be a challenging task to determine whether China is satisfied or dissatisfied with the current global system and with the role of the current global power. On many occasions, China has expressed its intentions not to transform the contemporary global system, while on the other hand, China has disagreements in many areas because the US is manipulating global institutions. China may not exactly attempt to subvert the existing order, nevertheless, China desires improvements by restructuring weak areas of the contemporary order with Chinese characteristics,

simultaneously the other countries under the umbrella of rising China may bandwagon to demand improving and rethinking of the existing laws of the contemporary institutions along with building parallel organizations to them (Rolland, 2020). Great powers after consolidating the opportunities and extending the sphere of influence and hegemony attempt to overcome their rivals (Mearsheimer, 2001). One of the objectives of this work is to know whether China will restructure the existing order as the previous hegemons did.

- Power transition theory argues two scenarios that lead to the outbreak of war, first; the power disparity between the two contending major powers of a system and second; the rising competitor's discontentment with the established hegemon (Organski, 1968). According to Organski two rivals or opposing groups tend to go to war when the power gap between them vanishes (Organski, 1968). While realists think that "maintaining a balance of power is crucial for preserving peace. (Waltz, 1964). The objective is to strive for an explanation of this theoretical concern by analysing the existing secondary data through qualitative research methodology.

Results and Discussions

The hypothesis of this study is supported by the findings that the prevailing hegemon power could no longer uphold the status of superpower because of the ascension of rising contender(s) on the global stage. The United States is in the process of multifaceted relative decline including economic, military, hard and soft power, resulting in to shrinking of its global influence. Because of this, the United States could no longer attempt to maintain liberal economic openness, promulgating liberal democratic norms and providing security to its global allies along with manipulating its global unipolar status. The relative decline and the rapidly decreasing power gap between the United States and the rising new challengers will ultimately result in the shift of contemporary global order. Amongst all the rising new challengers, China fits best on the global stage to challenge the unipolar status of the United States. China continues to keep the rank of the second largest global economic power with the largest standing military, while as of the economic forecasts, China seems to surpass the United States in the next one or two decades. The considerable mounting economy and rapidly expanding military power of China are helping it to propel not only the regional but also the global sphere of influence.

Despite all the differences between the United States and China, this study suggests that the current global power transition will be peaceful as long as the dominant power incorporates the role

of the rising challenger to contribute to resolving bilateral and global issues and accommodate the rising power in the global system. On the other hand, China desires improvements in the laws of current global institutions, however, it does not seem to put its weight on restructuring the existing order. The miracle of China's economic rise became conceivable only because of benefiting from the contemporary liberal economic order. The rising contender (China in this case study) will not halt the process of its economic development by engaging in large-scale conflicts with the United States and its allies.

Conclusion

In 2012, while on a visit to China, Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, shared her opinion on China's rise and its connection with the US, "Our two nations are trying to do something that has never been done in history...which is to write a new answer to the question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet" (Wan, 2012). The relative nose-diving United States and rising China are now in an inevitable power transition relationship (Tammen, 2000).

During the power transition process, a rising state is only tempted to wage war when it attains equal power to that of the established power or its allies, while the dominant power launches a war to prevent the rising contender from accomplishing enough power to challenge the existing order (Organski, 1968). China with

comprehensive economic, military and political clout is the primary challenge to not only the United States but also to the current world order. The 21st is going to witness the power transition relationship between the great powers. The decision-makers of the established powers have the choice to deal with the inherited ongoing perils related to the complexities of the power transition relations (Zhu, 2005). The United States and China along with having many differences are aware of the significance of the situation and neither side desires to indulge in large-scale conflict with each other. The available literature indicates that the current power transition will be relatively passive and comprised of interdependency and cooperation. China's current developmental programme is closely associated with the interest of the current order and international community, and it can not close its doors once after liberalising its economy (Zhu, 2005). Many scholars in the field suggest that the United States can manage its declining moment, and will encourage China to contribute to resolving issues related to the power transition.

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