

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07274-9 - Power, Order, and Change in World Politics

Edited by G. John Ikenberry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: power, order, and change in world politics

G. John Ikenberry

Introduction

The global system is in the midst of a great transformation. The distribution of power is shifting. Great powers are rising and declining. For almost a century, the United States dominated world politics. But today, China and other rising non-Western states, such as India and Brazil, are growing in wealth, power, influence, and ambition. The old order – led by the United States and its allies – is still a commanding presence in the global system. But the power once concentrated in the hands of the United States is diffusing outward and, as a result, new struggles are emerging over global rules and institutions. In the midst of these changes, scholars have been asking basic questions about the logic and character of contemporary international order. How profound is the change that is underway in global order? If the United States is losing its position of preeminence, will the order that it created weaken and break apart, giving way to a new type of global order? Or will non-Western rising states ultimately become stakeholders in the existing order? Do rising states want great authority and privileges in the existing international order or do they want to use their growing power to reorganize the basic principles and norms of the system?

The struggles underway today over international order are, of course, not new. The rise and decline of great powers and convulsive shifts in international order have played out many times over the centuries. In past eras, states have risen up, fought wars, and built international order. Spain, France, Great Britain, Germany – each of these states grew in power in a past century and made a bid to dominate Europe and the wider world. In turn, each declined or was defeated in war, triggering a renewal of geopolitical struggle over leadership and the organizing rules and arrangements of global order. Over the centuries, the actors on the global stage have changed but the scripts and plot lines of struggle over order have appeared and reappeared many times. As a result, scholars are asking questions about the past. Are there recurring

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07274-9 - Power, Order, and Change in World Politics

Edited by G. John Ikenberry

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *G. John Ikenberry*

historical dynamics and patterns that can help us understand today's power transitions and struggles over international order? What can we learn from the past? Is the past prolog? Are we doomed to repeat endlessly the cycles of rise and decline of power and international order that is found in our past?

This volume brings together nine leading scholars to explore these grand questions of global order and change. The starting point of each of these scholars is Robert Gilpin's classic work, *War and Change in World Politics*.¹ More than any other modern book on international relations theory, Gilpin's thirty-three-year-old classic offers the most sweeping, elegant, and influential account of the rise and decline of leading states and the international orders they create. Power, order, war, hegemony, and the transformation of world politics – these are the terms of reference in Gilpin's landmark work. In the three decades that have followed, the great debates over power transitions and the governance of world order have directly or indirectly built upon and engaged Gilpin's sweeping historical and theoretical vision.

The chapters that follow are not scholarly discussions, narrowly speaking, of Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics*. The book is simply their point of departure. Each chapter begins by engaging an aspect of Gilpin's book, using it as a springboard for making original arguments about order and change. Some of the authors find Gilpin's framework as a useful foundation for exploring contemporary dynamics of global change. Other authors make their arguments by critiquing the limits or blind spots in Gilpin's theoretical vision. Together, the chapters demonstrate the richness of analysis and debate that flows from the engagement with Gilpin's classic statement.

As a collection, the chapters offer a striking portrait of order and change in the global system. They do so by exploring the deep theoretical ideas that shape the way we think about great powers and the global orders they create. They also do so with a special eye on the changing American position in the global system and the challenges to the existing order that are being generated by China and other rising non-Western states. Together, the chapters move beyond Gilpin's original conception of war and change in world politics. Most of the authors argue against a rigid cyclical view of the rise and decline of states and international order. The distribution of material capabilities – and its shifts over time – provides the setting and resources for states as they struggle over the

¹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07274-9 - Power, Order, and Change in World Politics

Edited by G. John Ikenberry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

terms of world order. But grand shifts in the character of states, societies, capitalism, technologies, violence, and ideas are not cyclical. They change and evolve over the centuries. As a result, the future is never simply a reproduction of the past, not least international order.

In this introduction, I begin by looking at Robert Gilpin's theoretical vision of power, order, and change in world politics. After this, I locate the three great thematic areas of debate about order that lie at the heart of Gilpin's work, thematic areas that are explored in the chapters that follow. The first theme focuses on hegemonic power and the problem of rule or governance of international order. Here the questions concern the various ways that leading states project power and ideas into the global system and establish their rule over the system. The second theme focuses on the rise and decline of great powers and the logic of order formation and change. Here the questions are directed at the dynamics of power transitions and the opportunities these transitions create for struggles over order. The third theme focuses on system change and the foundations of world order. The focus here is on the great world historical shifts in the basic units and structures of global order – nation-states, empires, transnational society, and the transformations in these units and structures in the wake of political and technological revolutions. In each of these areas, I highlight the arguments advanced by the authors in this volume. Finally, I offer a more general portrait of our scholarly knowledge about order and change in world politics. The chapters in this book illuminate our current understandings of the logic of power and order – and they also illuminate the dilemmas and pathways of change in the current era of American-led world order.

The rise and fall of states and order

Robert Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics* has had an enduring impact on how scholars think about international order. A dominant tendency within the realist tradition has been to think about order in terms of anarchy. International order is seen as the result of the balancing interaction of states competing for security in a decentralized state system. Order is manifest as a power equilibrium. No state – not even a strong one – rules the system.

Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics* offered a different view, one in which powerful states rise up, create, and direct international order. States – strong ones – do rule the system. Building on a different strand of realist thinking, Gilpin sees world politics as a succession of ordered systems created by leading – or hegemonic – states that emerge after war

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07274-9 - Power, Order, and Change in World Politics

Edited by G. John Ikenberry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 G. John Ikenberry

with the opportunity and capabilities to organize the rules and arrangements of interstate relations.²

The Gilpin view about war and the rise and fall of international order has opened up a rich set of theoretical and historical issues. Order is not simply a “resultant” – it is created by leading states. Order is not simply “non-war” made possible by a balancing of power – it is infused with rules, institutions, and organizational principles. Order is not simply the crystallization of the distribution of power – it is constituted with authority relations, shared expectations, and settled practices through which states do business. Order is not built on the balance of power but on a structured asymmetry of power. To be sure, there is ambiguity in Gilpin’s theoretical vision about the degree to which international order goes beyond the power and coercion that the leading state wields in creating that order. Gilpin does suggest that order can be and often is based on more than coercive lead-state control. Ideology and mutual interests matter in various ways. In Gilpin’s vision, international order is a sort of primitive system of politics. It may look more Hobbesian than Lockean – but it is, nonetheless, a vision of international political order organized around hegemonic leaders, differential roles, authority relations, and complex moving parts.

In *War and Change in World Politics*, Gilpin seeks to provide a systematic theory of international political change. He does not claim to have discovered the “laws of change” in world politics, but he does offer a framework for thinking about war and change, one that he argues can help “identify recurrent patterns, common elements, and general tendencies in the major turning points in international history.”³ When and why do great shifts in international order occur? This is Gilpin’s question. His conviction is that there are patterns and regularities to global change. Ironically, Gilpin can make this claim about identifying the logic of international change because of his simultaneous insistence that when it comes to the “fundamental nature of international relations,” change has in fact *not* occurred over the centuries and millennia.⁴ At a deep level, Gilpin insists, the problem of change today is not unlike

² The alternative realist conception of order, defined in terms of anarchy and sustained by the balance of power, is articulated in Kenneth Waltz, *The Theory of International Politics* (New York, NY: Wiley, 1979). While Gilpin offers a narrative of change, Waltz provides a theory of continuity: why wars reoccur, why balances of power form and reform, and why attempts at military hegemony fail. For a discussion of these two influential theories of order, both realist but offering very different accounts, see William C. Wohlforth, “Gilpinian Realism and International Relations,” *International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (December 2011), pp. 499–511.

³ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 3. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07274-9 - Power, Order, and Change in World Politics

Edited by G. John Ikenberry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the problem of change in the ancient world or the eras that followed. Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War is as relevant today for understanding war and change as it was when it was written in the fifth century BC. As Gilpin sees it, the nature of contemporary international relations is what it has always been, "a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy."⁵

Gilpin's conceptual framework illuminates the timeless search by political actors for political order. The most powerful actors in a social system – or states within the international system – are driven to secure and advance their interests through the establishment of institutions and regularized relationships. The resulting political order serves the interests of the leading actors. Indeed, it is established precisely for this purpose. This is what happens in international relations. A powerful state rises up in the system and creates order, doing so to protect and advance its interests. Over time, however, the distribution of power and wealth changes, driven by the diffusion of technology and production. The old order still exists, but the underlying distribution of material capabilities that supported it has eroded. In Gilpin's language, a "disequilibrium" emerges between international order and the underlying distribution of power and interests. Eventually, the state or states that are growing more powerful and wealthy will seek to change the order to reflect their interests. At great historical junctures, this change is brought on by hegemonic wars in which a rising state violently takes command of the global system and overturns the old order. The resulting order reflects a new equilibrium between power and interests. As Gilpin puts it, "the process of international political change ultimately reflects the efforts of individuals or groups to transform institutions and systems in order to advance their interests."⁶

The framework Gilpin sketches in *War and Change in World Politics* provides a striking image of power and order in world politics. Like other theorists working in the areas of long cycles, power transitions, and hegemony, Gilpin sees global order moving through cycles of leadership and domination.⁷ The global system is built around powerful states who

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7. ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ The focus of *War and Change in World Politics* on recurring cycles of power and order places it in the company of several large literatures on power transitions, long cycles, and hegemonic stability theory. On power transitions, see A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1958); Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (University of Chicago Press, 1980); and Ronald Tammen, Jacek Kugler, and Douglas Lemke, et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Chatham House, 2000). On long cycles, see George Modelski, *Long Cycles in World Politics* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1987); George Modelski, ed., *Exploring Long Cycles* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987); William R. Thompson, *On Global*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07274-9 - Power, Order, and Change in World Politics

Edited by G. John Ikenberry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

construct hierarchical systems of political order. These hierarchical orders can persist for decades and even centuries. But eventually, underlying material conditions of power shift and transform, and the hierarchies of world politics break apart, sometimes quite violently.

Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics* is a useful starting point to illuminate the logic and character of international order and change for several reasons. First, one of the great challenges of international relations theory is to find analytic frameworks that allow scholars to explore similarities and differences in patterns of conflict and cooperation across historical eras. How do great powers operating in the seventeenth or eighteenth century compare with their counterparts in the twentieth or twenty-first century? How does the nature of international order change or evolve over the centuries as the character of the great powers who build and uphold international order change? In *War and Change*, Gilpin identifies two deep and recurring dynamics that appear and reappear across the centuries – the dynamic of power concentration and diffusion and the dynamic of war and order building. This twin focus allows scholars to move back and forth across eras to compare and assess how power and order have moved and shifted.

Second, Gilpin's theoretical vision focuses the study of international relations on the basic sources of political order. Powerful states build international order – this is Gilpin's contention. The material capabilities of states are the building blocks – the resources – that states use to build order. This is a very useful starting point for theory and debate about the structure and functioning of world politics. It allows scholars to think about the global system as a type of political order or political system. States operate in this order. It is not just an abstract “anarchy” or the epiphenomenal outcome resulting from the interaction of states. Political orders have rights and rules and institutions, even if they are ultimately the product of powerful states pursuing their interests. In this sense there is a sort of “base-superstructure” aspect to Gilpin's vision. Material capabilities – and their changing distribution among states – provide the base or

War: Historical-Structural Approaches to World Politics (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); and Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, *The Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490–1900* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1994). On hegemonic stability theory, see Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–39* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974); Stephen D. Krasner, “State Power and the Structure of International Trade,” *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (April 1976), pp. 317–347; Robert Keohane, “The Theory of Hegemonic Stability Theory and Changes in International Economic Regimes,” in Ole R. Holsti, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alexander L. George, ed., *Change in the International System* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980); and Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 1987).

foundation for superstructural political relationships and institutions to form. These aspects of Gilpin's theory provide a useful starting point for developing more complicated sorts of theories about power and order.

Beyond this, Gilpin's *War and Change* offers three major "problems" about power and order that provide the thematic organization for this book. First, there is the "problem" of rule and domination within international orders. How do states that sit on top of global power hierarchies establish their dominance and run the order? What do hegemonic states do when they are being hegemonic? The second "problem" concerns the great-power shifts within a global system and the rise and decline of imperial and hegemonic orders that result. This is the problem of power transitions, hegemonic wars, and construction and destruction of international order. The focus is on the transition from one hegemonic-led order to another. Finally, and most generally, there is the "problem" of the macro-shifts in the global system – that is, in the basic units and organizing logic of the global system. What accounts for the great shifts from global systems organized around, say, city-states or universal empire to a system of sovereign states? The focus at this macro-level is not on the changes in leadership of the global system. Rather, the focus is on the deeper "revolutions" in the units and organizing character of the global system itself. In each of these thematic areas, three authors offer historical and theoretical arguments. The intellectual architecture of Gilpin's *War and Change* provides the foundation and starting point for new inquiries into the nature of power, order, and change. We can briefly summarize these contributions.

Types of international orders and strategies of rule

The first part of the book explores variations in types of international orders and the strategies hegemonic states employ to rule these orders. The focus here is on the different ways in which hegemonic powers can create order. If all orders are a mix of coercion and consent, what choices and circumstances lead hegemonic states to create one mix or another mix? Global hierarchical orders can be built around imperial or liberal logics. How do these types of hierarchies differ and what explains why one or the other emerges within a particular historical era? How do we compare and evaluate the performance of international orders? We are also interested in the way leading states "manage" or "govern" international order. What does it mean when we say that leading states "run" or "rule" an international order? If the United States has pursued a "liberal strategy" of order building and governance, what sort of strategy of governance might China pursue?

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07274-9 - Power, Order, and Change in World Politics

Edited by G. John Ikenberry

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *G. John Ikenberry*

In the first chapter, Charles A. Kupchan explores the types of national values, cultural orientations, and societal interests that leading states bring to the building of international order. Kupchan argues that Gilpin, along with most other scholars of hegemony, relies exclusively on material variables: order emerges from disparities of power and hierarchies enforced by the leading state. But Kupchan suggests that hegemonic orders vary widely in their “packages of ordering ideas and rules.” These ideas and rules exhibit normative orientations and they are imbued with cultural and ideological dispositions. It follows that the American liberal world order is not an expression of universal values or ideals. Rather, it is imbued with cultural and political ideals unique to American society. With the decline of American power and the weakening of the liberal international order, Kupchan argues that rival and successor hegemonic states will bring forward their own cultural values and political ideals – leading to a more pluralistic, diversified, and regionalized world order. Kupchan unpacks these claims through an examination of four hegemonic powers – the Ottomans, Imperial China, Great Britain, and the United States.

In the second chapter, David A. Lake explores unresolved questions that flow from Gilpin’s conception of hegemonic order. First, noting that coercion is actually quite rare in world politics, Lake poses the question of why states in fact comply with the rules and institutions of international order. What provides the basis for command and rule? Lake argues that “authority” is the key feature of hierarchy orders. Legitimate domination is more desirable as a source of stable rule than coercion – and hierarchical orders reflect this fact. Second, Lake asks the question of why liberal hierarchical orders were the most successful over the last two hundred years.

Here Lake argues that the domestic constitutional limits of the abuse of power within liberal democracies make them more effective at establishing authoritative rule within international order. Finally, Lake asks the question of why there is so little “war and change” in the contemporary global system. His answer leads him to explore the role of “vested” interests in the existing order. In effect, order becomes self-reinforcing. In each of these theoretical claims, Lake finds implications for how China and other rising states might reconcile themselves and become stakeholders within the prevailing global order.

In the third chapter, G. John Ikenberry steps back to look at the various ways in which leading states have created international order, noting the distinctive character of the American “liberal hegemonic” order. The chapter goes on to explore the reasons and circumstances that lead major states to seek to construct international order – identifying the incentives,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07274-9 - Power, Order, and Change in World Politics

Edited by G. John Ikenberry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

constraints, opportunities, and tools that are associated with these potential order-building moments. While Gilpin sees an endless cycle of rising and falling orders, Ikenberry argues that it is possible to see order building as an evolutionary or unfolding process driven by the order-building “projects” of the Westphalian system and the liberal ascendancy. Seen in this light, the American-led liberal international order is not simply a “creature” of American power, but is responsive to these deeper unfolding logics of order building. Ikenberry argues that for an international order to be durable, it needs to be built around three features. It must be supported by a configuration of power, wielded by one or several leading states. There must be some measure of legitimacy to the rule and institutions that mark the order. And the order must provide functional returns to participating states. That is, it must solve collective action problems or provide services and benefits to states within the order. Ikenberry argues that if these claims are correct, the American-led international order may have more life in it than is generally thought. China and other states may grow more powerful but an alternative order that harnesses the power of leading states may not exist for decades to come.

Power transition and the rise and decline of international order

The second part of the book focuses on power transitions and the rise and decline of international orders. This cyclical drama is at the heart of Gilpin’s vision of world politics. Powerful states are never powerful forever. The ground upon which they stand is always moving – and at critical moments, power shifts create the conditions for war, upheaval, and the reordering of global politics. As Gilpin argues, these power transitions are moments that are fraught with danger and frequently laced with violence. The powerful but declining state – which has built and ruled the international order – is now losing ground to a rising state or group of states that increasingly seek to challenge the old order. As Gilpin sees it, these passages from an international order dominated by one state to one dominated by another are typically marked by hegemonic wars. Three chapters explore these issues of power transition and order, each building on but also complicating the basic Gilpin vision.

In Chapter 4, William C. Wohlforth explores the logic of hegemonic decline. This has remained an understudied question within the broader literature of the rise and decline of international order. Wohlforth asks the question: is the pursuit of hegemony self-defeating? The conventional answer is yes. Drawing on Gilpin’s *War and Change*, Kennedy’s *Rise and*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07274-9 - Power, Order, and Change in World Politics

Edited by G. John Ikenberry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 G. John Ikenberry

Fall, and a number of other key works, scholars routinely maintain that asserting and sustaining leadership over an international system inevitably becomes a losing proposition that causes the hegemon to decline faster than it otherwise would. Wohlforth shows that this conventional wisdom rests on weak foundations. Scholars have failed to distinguish between causes of decline that are exogenous to hegemony and the international system and those that are causally connected to being the hegemon or pursuing hegemony. Mechanisms of decline that really stem from being the hegemon or pursuing hegemony have rarely been identified, and those that have are weakly grounded in logic and poorly supported by evidence. A new wave of scholarship has emerged over the last two decades showing that, if anything, hegemons can use their position to slow decline and mitigate its effects. The implications for the debate on the US grand strategy are straightforward: think long and hard before giving up hard-won positions of systemic leadership and embarking on heedless retrenchment.

In Chapter 5, Jonathan Kirshner argues that *War and Change* remains, properly, a vital and relevant text for students and practitioners of world politics, despite the fact that it was rooted in the Cold War concerns of the later 1970s and raised alarming expectations that failed to materialize. But there was always more – much more – to *War and Change* than the derivation of a deductive theory to be judged on its predictive power. It was also a summary statement of classical realism, an attribute obscured by the fact that the book attempted to offer a hybrid of classical and structural theorizing. This chapter first situates Gilpin and *War and Change* in the context of classical realism, which differs from structural realism in its treatment of politics, history, ideology, and the motivations of states and relevance of statesmen. A second section then considers the distinct classical treatment of actors' rationality and their capacity for prediction. A renewed emphasis on these elements advances our understanding of *War and Change* (and world politics) by resolving two basic unresolved puzzles generated by the book, rooted in problematic assumptions regarding the efficiency of hegemonic expansion, and under-theorized explanations for the challenges of decline and the difficulty of retrenchment. Resolving these loose ends by emphasizing the classical realist elements of *War and Change* yields improved and enduring insights into perennial (and contemporary) problems posed by rising states and declining great powers. A concluding section briefly summarizes some of the enduring lessons of *War and Change*.

In Chapter 6, Michael Mastanduno explores the “grand bargains” that are part of the underside of hegemonic orders. As Gilpin argues, a powerful state does not simply create order through force. At least in