

# Long Cycles and International Regimes

Written by George Modelski

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GEORGE MODELSKI, OCT 15 2012

The chief point of this article is to argue that long cycle theory and international regime theory are mutually compatible, and indeed mutually supportive, and that this compatibility, and mutual reinforcement need to be at least acknowledged if not fully explored[\*]. Long cycle theory dates back to the 1970s, the point of origin being the paper on “Long cycles of global politics and the nation-state” presented to the 1976 Edinburgh Congress of the International Political Science Association[1]. Regime theory is usually traced back to the 1982 special issue of *International Organization* whose anniversary we are observing. Maybe the time has come for reviewing this relationship.

### Long Cycle Theory

Four salient characteristics of the theory of long cycles of global politics may be suggested as the framework of this discussion. (1) It is a theory of global authority structures; (2) it is process-, hence time-oriented; (3) it situates long cycles as a mechanism of global political evolution; and (4) it elucidates systematic links with other processes of the modern world system.

First of all, long cycle theory is about the global authority structures of the modern world system, and the way that they are creating an increasingly complex global political system. The term ‘cycle’ refers to the pattern of regularity that has marked this development, in the same sense that the expression ‘electoral cycle’ refers to a certain rhythm in many countries’ political life. For the past half-millennium, that pattern or rhythm has been driven by a succession of globally-oriented nation-states, the most recent being the United States, that took a leading role in constructing the elements of that system as a form of public goods, even while engaging in confrontations with mostly continental challengers. In other words, and contrary to much conventional thinking about international affairs, the modern world has not been anarchical in the sense that it lacks elements of rule or order, meaning “international anarchy” is not a satisfactory description of modern politics.

Secondly, as must by now be apparent, long cycle theory elucidates the working of processes, and that means that it is diachronic in its principal orientation to the long-run, on the scale of generations. Contrary to contemporary IR preoccupation with current affairs, long cycle theory reaches back in time in order to look farther into the future. It is not history, but rather a study of the emergence, and working, and possible fade-out of institutions that are still with us; while not history, it is capable of furnishing a good story about the unfolding of global politics. The period of a long cycle being some four generations, studies of long cycles do need to take the long view to gain perspective. Considerable evidence for long term regularity is now at hand.[2]

Third, the theory proposes that long cycles are the mechanism of global evolution; it rejects imperial solutions in favor of institutional system-building that promotes the emergence of a global polity just as it completes the formation of the system of nation-states. Importantly, it views political system-building as a (self-organizing) learning process that passes (in generation-long phases) from agenda-formation (variety-creation), via coalition-building (cooperation), and macrodecision-selection, to execution-reinforcement. The theory is neither realist nor neo-realist, nor is it idealist-constructivist; it relies instead on an understanding of world system evolution.[3] It is a theory of long-term international institution-building.

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Lastly, the theory examines global politics, not a stand-alone phenomenon; rather, it inquires into the relationship of system-building in this sphere, *inter alia*, to the rise of a global economy, the formation of a global community, and the role of the world of learning. That is, it is interdisciplinary by design, and requires a broad outlook for tolerating ambiguity.

## International Regimes Considered Diachronically

In what way is long cycle theory compatible with regime theory? Let us follow here Oran Young's definition of regimes as "institutions that are specialized to a particular issue ... or a spatially defined area"; wherein institutions are assemblages of rights, rules and decision-making procedures, and organizations are material entities that employ people and have budgets and are often but not invariably associated with institutions.[4] By institutions and regimes we mean, of course, international regimes and institutions with a minimum of two participating states.[5] What is the record of regimes of the past half millennium?

The first iteration of "the emerging global political regime"[6] was that established by Portugal and Spain for the division of the world ocean by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). This was a bilateral arrangement between two states, but it was also endorsed, in 1506, by Pope Julius II, giving it a wider legitimacy, at least in Europe. Its basic rule, spatially defined, was the establishment of a line of demarcation, running in the Atlantic from the North to the South Pole, between the Portuguese and the Spanish oceanic zones, thus resolving possible matters of contention. It was also an instrument of cooperation in enforcing its provisions, e.g. in naval coordination and mutual support against piracy[7]. It lasted for about a century, finally succumbing to the rising maritime powers of the Dutch Republic and England.

Three more milestones in the story of long cycles marked the development of this original kernel of the global political regime: the Truce of Antwerp (1609) that terminated the Tordesillas system on the seas and provided for new rules for trade and for freedom of the seas as part of the new international law; the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) that in effect implemented the notion, first proclaimed by William III of England, and Dutch Stadholder (1701), of a European power balance, and finally the Peace of Vienna (1815), that launched the institution of the Concert of European Powers, while leaving the rest of the world in Britain's care. None of these new rules enjoyed the support of specialized organizations; but they did benefit from the growth of the legal profession recognizing the notion of an international legal system. Each of these steps added some complexity to this basically simple system of low institutionalization that concerned primarily maritime-oceanic questions but gave clear evidence of emerging authority structures at the global level.

A novel feature of the Congress of Vienna was the Declaration "relative to the universal abolition of the slave trade", a response to the "public opinion in all civilized countries".[8] It was a statement of principles that took many years to be accomplished, with the British navy becoming an instrument of its implementation on the seas. But it was the expansion of the world economy and growth of connectivity in the age of the industrial and information revolutions (steamships, railroads, telegraphs, etc.), in the contexts of British and then American leadership, that set in motion the proliferation of international regimes that has continued through the 20<sup>th</sup>, and in strength after 1945, well into the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

A basic set of specialized international regimes arose even before 1945, in the European context, mostly with British backing but also some American input.[9] Free trade was a key British concern but it remained a frequently contested bilateral matter and did not receive a multilateral solution. The classical cases are the Universal Postal Union, established on the initial initiative of the US Postmaster-General between 1863 and 1875, with a permanent secretariat at Bern, Switzerland, that regularized and standardized international postal traffic and boasts 192 members in 2012, and the International Telecommunications Union (Geneva), founded 1870 in the age of the telegraph, that now might be seeking a take-over of the internet (currently managed by ICANN, a non-profit corporation headquartered in Los Angeles). Other examples include the forerunner of the Food and Agricultural Organization, founded in Rome in 1904, at the urging of David Lubin, a Californian farmer-activist, to protect the interests of agriculturalists against those of speculators; the International Labor Organization (Geneva), and a predecessor of UNESCO (Paris), founded respectively in 1919 and 1922; the early health organizations (1909 and

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1923), now reorganized as the World Health Organization (Geneva), dealing with such issues as global epidemics; and The Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907 that consolidated and civilized the rules governing warfare.

After 1945, with an augmented role for the United States, these gathered strength and influence, in particular in conjunction with the founding of the United Nations (New York and Geneva) as a successor organization to the League of Nations (Geneva). The most glaring pre-1945 omissions: finance and trade, developed new rules and financially-strong organizations while new issues such as nuclear, and climate, have gained prominence. The most important financial organizations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, both located in Washington, now carry hefty weight in financial matters (loans and credits on the order of \$400 billion in 2010), have developed systematic methods of global surveillance and national oversight ('conditionality'), and usually have a seat at the table at times of crisis. The 1944 bargain, wherein it was agreed that an American would head the World Bank, and a European, the IMF, foreshadowed broadly the distribution of authority throughout the system of international regimes for decades to come.

The World Trade Organization, in Geneva, that now includes both China and Russia, is the principal venue for trade disputes that would otherwise tend to contaminate inter-state relations. The nuclear non-proliferation regime enshrined in the treaty of 1968 is supported by teams of skilled specialists in the International Atomic Energy Agency (Vienna). There are a number of other regimes within the ambit of the United Nations system (maritime questions, tourism, refugees, intellectual property, etc.) as well as others outside it. Climate might well become a central domain for a new one, for which the World Meteorological Organization (successor to IMO founded 1873), located in Geneva, has provided, and will continue to provide, specialist services, via the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). Nor can we forget the role of NGOs, of which the International Red Cross-Red Crescent Movement that evolved since 1863 to include both a purely Swiss component (the International Committee), and since 1919, prompted by the American Red Cross, an international component (the International Federation in Geneva), both disposing of significant revenues, and with the Federation claiming 97 million volunteers, may be one of the most active, but hardly unique.

The record shows that, over time, the fate of international regimes is closely linked to the working of the long cycle of global politics. The system-builders, the world powers of the long cycle, have clearly had a major influence in the fostering of regimes. and a continuing but hardly overwhelming influence in their operation, more so in the earlier cycles where regime maintenance was entirely the responsibility of its sponsors, than in the more recent cycles when sponsorship has broadened, and regime organizations began to acquire some life of their own. However, that hardly makes regimes 'epiphenomenal' in relation to the powers, for regimes have in past experience outlasted the terms of leadership of their sponsors. Interestingly, Geneva, city of a small power, has remained a major seat of this regime activity of 'global governance' for almost two centuries.

### Compatible and Complementary

Long cycles are fully compatible with international regimes because both concern the creation and working of institutions. They are also complementary in as much regime theory centers on the more recent, and the more specialized forms, serving up thick descriptions of the working of particular regimes. Long cycles tend to excel in tracing, generalizing and explaining long-term developments and the more general types of regime that command much political attention.

Long cycle analysis suggests that the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, roughly 1850, marks the start of a transition between two periods of global political evolution, from that of core formation of the global polity (coalition-building/cooperation), to one of constructing a global political organization (macro-decision). That transition might also be conceptualized as one between what might be called two super-regimes of the global political system: the first one shaped by global system-builders, nation-states with a maritime orientation,[10] and its sequel, one that consolidates a global-level polity of a quasi-federalist type around such problem areas as nuclear weapons, and/or climate change. Such a transition cannot not expected to be imminent; for, according to the model, it might take another century, to the early 2200s, to reach maturity, but it is already in the air, and the growth of the regime sphere is one of the harbingers of such momentous change. It is important for students of regimes to be aware of such a possibility, and to debate

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what the shape, and salient features might be of an emerging super-regime.

To recapitulate the key points of this brief essay: (1) Like long cycles, regimes have been elements of global order for most of the past half-millennium and belie the notion of an 'international anarchy'. (2) Over system time, regime growth is shown to be directionality linked to long cycles: regimes have become more numerous, more powerful and more complex, and are still expanding. (3) The efficient theoretical explanation of regime growth, as of long cycles, is global political evolution, affecting the measured emergence of the global polity in a global democratic order. (4) Regime analysis makes possible a closer insight of the connections between political, economic, social and cultural processes.

## The Outlook

While thinking about the next few decades, we need to distinguish between routine tasks of global organization, and projects that will call for innovation, and structural change:

"Once established, international regimes administer routine problems. We regard routine cooperation, even among egoists, as non-surprising, and as little in need of explanation as is some standard, or minimum amount of conflict. Leadership, on the other hand, concerns crises, and innovative responses that call for learning. The global system will continue to experience crises, in response to which leadership of a 'traditional' kind will be called for... We therefore expect that routine cooperation will continue even in periods of waning leadership..."[11]

These considerations would qualify the expectations of hegemonic stability theory but they do not deny the need for leadership to be periodically renewed.

In conclusion we might ask about the future of international regimes in the light of long cycle theory. International regimes have been broadening their authority and their membership structures beyond the United States and Europe, and that engagement will continue.[12] Are they to keep expanding, and so for how much and how long? In general terms, we would expect periods of rising complexity to give rise to instability due to overlap, waste, and lack of coordination, and to be followed by periods of simplification, readjustment of functions, and broadening of constituencies. That would argue for the merger of some regimes and the fading of others, but in what time frame? Probably in the framework of one century, with regimes providing the opportunities for engagement in global problems that is needed to avoid a repeat of earlier confrontation on issues of global authority.[13] By the year 2100 then, we may have passed far enough in that process to achieve a consolidation of a global order anchored in a community of democracies.

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[\*] I wish to thank Luke M. Herrington for suggesting this topic.

[1] Published as G. Modelski (1978), "The long cycle of global politics and the nation-state," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. For more recent statements see G. Modelski (1987), *Long Cycles in World Politics*, London: Macmillan; G. Modelski (2000), "From Leadership to Organization" in V. Bornschier and C. Chase-Dunn eds., *The Future of Global Conflict*, London: Sage; T. Devezas and G. Modelski (2011), "World system processes: an evolutionary approach," *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, [www.eolss.org](http://www.eolss.org). For a 1975-1985 bibliography see G. Modelski ed. (1987), *Exploring Long Cycles*, Boulder: Lynne

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Rienner, at pp. 249-272.

[2] See, *inter alia*, G. Modelski and W.R. Thompson (1988), *Sea power in global politics 1494-1993*, London: Macmillan; G. Modelski and W.R. Thompson (1996), *Leading Sectors and World Powers: the co-evolution of global politics and economics*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

[3] G. Modelski (1996), "An evolutionary paradigm for global politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, 40:321ff; also see "The Evolutionary World Politics Homepage" at <http://faculty.washington.edu/modelski/>.

[4] Oran Young "Regime Theory Thirty Years On: Taking Stock, Moving Forward," *e-ir.info*, September 18, 2012.

[5] International regimes may be contrasted with imperial systems, such as the *Pax Mongolica* over the Silk Roads, c.1250-1350; see J. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, New York: Oxford U.P., Ch.5, on its working, and its instabilities.

[6] G. Modelski and S. Modelski eds. (1988), *Documenting Global Leadership*, London: Macmillan, p.38.

[7] Text of the treaty, *ibid*, Doc. 3; naval treaty of 1552, Doc. 10.

[8] *Ibid.*, Doc. 40.

[9] An early review is Leonard Woolf's *International Government* (1916), Part II, 139-370 (Google Books).

[10] My preference is not to use the term 'hegemonic' for that super-regime. The more accurate term has been 'global leadership', or else, 'core- or system-building', as in "The Portuguese as system-builders" by T. Devezas and G. Modelski at pp. 30-57 of G. Modelski, T. Devezas and W. Thompson eds. (2008), *Globalization as Evolutionary Process*, New York: Routledge.

[11] G. Modelski (1999), "From organization to leadership," *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 36.

[12] G. Modelski, (2012) "Preventing global war" at pp. 587-609 of *The Ashgate Research Companion to War: Origins and Prevention*, London: Ashgate.

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