

Gilpinian Realism and Peaceful Change: The Coming Sino-American Power Transition

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KEELAN WALDRON, APR 23 2020

Realist interpretations of the coming United States (US)-China power transition have been dominated by Mearsheimer's (2014b) offensive realist argument that China cannot rise peacefully. However, there has also been a resurgence in interest in Gilpin's (1981) account of international political change, because his theory of hegemonic decline seems to aptly describe the US case, while his characterisation of rising powers can be applied to China. This essay defines 'peaceful change' as 'a process whereby a hegemon cedes its dominant geopolitical role to a challenger in one or more regions' in the absence of significant military conflict (Taliaferro, Lobell & Ripsman, 2018, p.283). The region concerned is the Asia-Pacific.

This essay is cautiously optimistic about prospects for peaceful change. In Section 1, it outlines Gilpin's realist framework and distinguishes it from neorealists and roots it in classical realism. In Section 2, this essay argues that narratives of China's 'new assertiveness', as either (i) a function of its increasing relative power or (ii) driven by rising nationalism and its increasing influence over Chinese foreign policy, are unconvincing. Rather, China is a reluctantly assertive power, acting understandably in response to unnecessary US encirclement. In Section 3, it is argued that the key to peaceful change is concessions made by the dominant power, in the form of retrenchment. The US suffers from hegemonic decline and imperial overstretch, and it is turning inwards, retreating from global leadership. Thus, imperatives for retrenchment are present, with two important qualifications that the essay will note. On balance, this essay concludes that the US is likely to cede influence to China in the Asia-Pacific, and that the historic cycle of hegemonic war will be broken.

1. Gilpinian Realism

Gilpin (1981) develops an account of international political change that focuses on dynamic conceptions of power. International political history is characterised by repetitive, natural cycles of the rise and fall of great powers and international orders dominated by an individual hegemonic state. The source of international political change is the differential/uneven (principally economic) growth rates of states over time (p.93). Consequently, hegemons inevitably face relative decline and rising powers become more assertive and seek to expand their influence in line with their power (pp.94-95).

Relations are fraught with danger as the power gap closes and disagreements over status/strength increase. Without peaceful transition, hegemonic war is the likely outcome, particularly if the two powers disagree over/misperceive one another's military strength (Gilpin, 1981, p.186). Hegemonic war, therefore, serves to clarify the actual distribution of power and resolve the disagreement, and, akin to creative destruction, it wipes away the old order and allows a new one to rise (Schweller, 2014, pp.50-51). For Gilpin (1981, p.194) retrenchment as a peaceful mechanism of change is politically difficult, fundamentally due to the prestige loss incurred from essentially admitting defeat. It causes the flight of allies to the rising power and the rising power to further increase its demands. However, this essay argues that retrenchment is a surprisingly feasible strategy, considering the systemic and domestic forces at work in the US-China transition.

Importantly, Gilpin (1981) is not a neorealist. He rejects their 'overly deterministic type of interpretation' (p.47).

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Systemic variables are 'ultimately indeterminate' (p.105) and 'both the structure... and domestic conditions... are primary determinants of foreign policy' (p.87). The 'core of his approach is...classical realist' (Mastanduno, 2014, p.162; Kirshner, 2014). Great powers have system-shaping capability and are not helpless before systemic pressures: 'though always constrained, choices always exist' (Gilpin, 1981, p.228). Gilpin places significant importance, then, on the agency and choices of great powers in determining international outcomes. His account is not predictive; it is a framework to apply to cases with the relevant domestic context (p.47). Realists traditionally consider nationalism a powerful force in international politics, and so this essay augments its analysis with references to nationalism (Mearsheimer, 2011; Morgenthau, 2006, p.145; Schweller, 2014).

Finally, Gilpin (1981), despite his pessimism, does not think hegemonic war is inevitable. More so than many neorealists, he declares his book a normative enterprise. Due to the catastrophic costs of modern war, we must understand its relationship with change. 'Only in this way can we hope to fashion a more peaceful alternative' and reconcile international morality and international politics (p.9). As such, this essay is both descriptive and normative.

2. China's Reluctant Assertiveness

Rising powers, with the 'advantages of backwardness', benefit from catch-up growth, low costs and rising rates of return. Technology diffuses from existing powers and allows rising powers to develop abnormally quickly (Gilpin, 1981, p.185). The rising power's increasing fortunes tempt it to alter the system in its political, economic and/or territorial interests (pp.94-95). A gap opens between the hierarchy of prestige and actual distribution of power. Prestige lags power transitions, so for a time, the rising power does not receive the deserved recognition commensurate with its power. Rising powers are then portrayed as 'arrogant and striving', because they submit progressively more grievances with the existing order (Kirshner, 2019, p.60).

The rise of China at the expense of the US is a common theme in realist scholarship (Zakaria, 2009; Kupchan, 2012; Mearsheimer, 2010; Mastanduno, 2014; Schweller, 2018). Consistent with realist logic, China's military spending rose significantly from 1990-2016 and at 2018 stood at \$250bn (Stockholm Peace Research Institute, 2019). While it lies far below the US, that may reverse in the coming decades (US Department of Defense, 2019). While Gilpin (1981, p.93) holds that power shifts are gradual, Mastanduno (2014, p.175) argues that momentous events can clarify power shifts underway that may have been obscured previously. This is why many accounts of China's assertiveness point to the 2008 financial crisis as a watershed moment, where Chinese leaders perceived a dramatic transfer of wealth, power and prestige from West to East (Swaine, 2010, p.6). In turn, so the argument goes, China was emboldened to depart from Deng's maxim of 'keeping a low profile' (KLP)—which emphasised internal stability, biding time and economic development—to Xi's 'striving for achievement' and stressing of 'national rejuvenation' (Yan, 2014). Ultimately, from a systemic level perspective, China's purported assertiveness is a product of favourable shifts in the distribution of power.

Prima facie, China's maritime assertiveness could be evidence for such claims. On the territorial front, because of its infamous 'nine-dash line', China claims 62-90% (depending on estimate) of the South China Sea, which encroaches upon territory currently held by states like Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines (O'Rourke, 2019). China has literally created new territory with its construction of artificial islands across the first island chain, which amount to 'unsinkable aircraft carriers' where it stations military forces and weapons (Herscovitch, 2017). China's ever-expanding anti-access/area denial system (which denies external influence by meddling powers) and regular military patrolling across this island chain are part of what many believe to be a strategy of pushing back US influence from the first island chain, and eventually, the second (Mearsheimer, 2014b, p.374).

There are reasons to doubt this analysis, however. Fundamentally, the relative power gap between the US and China is still huge. China's naval capability is dwarfed by the US in both size and modernisation (US Department of Defense, 2019). Provoking confrontations and crises with heightened risks of misperception and tragic outcomes seems too early if relative power is solely considered (Ye, 2011, p.83). Rationally, China should pursue its KLP foreign policy for longer. The question, then, is about what other factors are causing China's actions.

China's submission of the document that included the nine-dashed line and claim to sovereignty over a large portion

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of the South China Sea was neither novel nor unilateral. It was submitted in response to a UN-mandated deadline in 2009 and in response to competing claims by Malaysia and Vietnam that were made *before* China's. Successive documents were similarly submitted in response to UN deadlines and claims by other states. The UN deadline 'created a moment for states to issue claims, counter-claims, and counter counter-claims' (Swaine, 2011, p.3). China's claims were also consistent with its position since 1947; at most, China's 2009 submission clarified, but certainly did not expand, its territorial claims. Moreover, China does not claim all territory contained *within* the nine-dash line; rather, it claims the islands *along* the line (ibid, p.4). Granted, the argument here is not that China is needlessly provoked by other regional powers, but that China's claims do not represent a new unilateral assertiveness.

More broadly, applying Gilpin's principles 'realistically', China's assertiveness in pursuing its territorial interests is largely due to an understandable fear of US encirclement. Mearsheimer (2014b, p.382) appeals to the security dilemma to argue that, due to anarchy and the unknowability of intentions, China is bound to perceive its action as defensive and the US' as offensive, and the US vice versa. Accordingly, it is just tragically predictable that this is how relations are structured. This position reduces China-US competition in the Asia-Pacific to a deterministic, impersonal process. It clashes with Gilpin's and other classical realists' emphasis on indeterminacy and the agency/choice great powers exercise, and the resultant responsibility they have.

Nonetheless, China's behaviour can be explained by fears of encirclement in less deterministic terms. Mearsheimer (2014a) has no qualms condemning NATO expansion into Russia's proximity as provoking their annexation of Crimea. Why should China not be similar? Indeed, concerns of a 'C-shaped encirclement' of China by the US, across the second and then first island chains, pervade Chinese literature (Qin & Li, 2010; Huang, 2010; Garver & Wang, 2010, p.239). It is no imagined encirclement; the US has military bases in the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Australia and Guam, as well as alliances with Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and Australia (Heritage Foundation, 2019). China's 'new assertiveness' coincided with America diverting more resources to the Asia-Pacific, including the strategic 'pivot', as well as the perception that the US would use military force against China in its South China Sea disputes (Herscovitch, 2017). Classical realism, on the contrary, is consistent with acknowledging the realities of power and respecting spheres of influence (Kennan, 1951, p.88; Morgenthau, 1951, p.133).

Other scholars, including realists, also focus on rising Chinese nationalism and its increasing influence over Chinese foreign policy (Zhao, 2013; Hughes, 2011; Schweller, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2014b, pp.399-403). After 2008, Zhao (2013) argues Chinese foreign policy underwent a 'strident turn': due to its sense of empowerment derived from its newfound wealth and power, and in an effort to divert attention away from political, economic and social tensions domestically, the Chinese Communist Party became more willing to heed popular nationalist calls for a more aggressive pursuance of core national interests. Similarly, in a widely cited article, Hughes (2011) covers a flurry of popular nationalist books released post-2008 and argues that they contain draconian geopolitical themes, such as praising imperial martial values and territorial expansion to secure economic resources, which, he says, are similar to ideas held in Germany and Japan before WWII. Mearsheimer (2014b, p.401) claims China is 'ripe for hypernationalism' and such hypernationalism is a 'potent source of war'. Attention is drawn to China's historical context of great power victimisation at the hands of Japan and the West and how this informs an insecurity that drives Chinese revisionism.

Again, there are problems here. Accounts of 'rising Chinese nationalism' are narratives, backed by individual examples of nationalist outrage, which are unbacked by further empirical evidence. This is partly because the study of public opinion in authoritarian single-party states is hamstrung by transparency issues (Johnston & Shen, 2015, p.6; Weiss, 2019). Nonetheless, existing empirical evidence reveals little proof of a burgeoning Chinese nationalism that independently influences foreign policy. Johnston (2017), examining several well-known Chinese surveys, finds no evidence of rising nationalism, including no difference in nationalism between younger and older generations. Weiss (2019) finds no evidence of increasing nationalism among younger people, but did find that they tend to be more hawkish. However, 'the pressure of public opinion has not yet been decisive in compelling the Chinese government to use force in its maritime and territorial disputes' (p.692). This echoes Chubb (2018) who examines five cases of acute, heated territorial dispute escalations, and concludes that 'nationalism has had little to do with

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China's assertive turn' (p.159). Indeed, he finds only evidence that the CCP has selectively repressed popular nationalist outrage when it threatens to spiral out of control (pp.173-174). This, too, is what Chen (2014) argues. Among the popular nationalist books Hughes (2011) analyses, there was more condemnation of the themes therein than support among the public. The comparison drawn with dangerous ideas held in Germany and Japan pre-WWII is unhelpful and incorrect. All this is not to deny cases of popular nationalist outrage on the street (including violent cases) and particularly on social media. But there is no evidence that it forces the CCP to action. Rather, the CCP wields popular nationalism pragmatically, enabling it as a source of legitimacy, but repressing it if it advocates a recklessly confrontational stance against other powers.

This essay's argument is not that China is a hapless victim and a benevolent rising power. Nor does it claim that China adheres to international law and multilateral solutions to problems when they contradict its own interests. For example, it ignored an international court's ruling in favour of the Philippines' claims in the South China Sea and waged a 'geopolitical battle' to denigrate the ruling, including tough diplomacy and conspiratorial propaganda campaigns blaming an anti-China plot originating from America and Japan (Zhao, 2018, pp.7-8). This is entirely consistent with realist logic. But it has stopped short of military conflict in all cases, and it has used coercive tactics that have had relatively low threats to regional security (Herscovitch, 2017). Thus, while China is motivated by realpolitik, the CCP seems prudent and pragmatic, not wishing to initiate military conflict with its neighbours. Beijing acts like a classical realist, not an offensive realist. Its assertiveness is plausibly explained by the strategic choices of other states, especially the needlessly offensive encirclement by the US. Moreover, it is not captured by hypernationalist passions that may provoke an expansionist strategy.

3. The Case for US Retrenchment

This leads directly to Gilpin's best hope as a mechanism for peaceful change. Gilpin (1981, p.206) chimes with Carr (1946, p.169, p.222) in stating that the existing hegemon has 'the moral obligation to make the greater concessions... to achieve successful compromise'. Gilpin (1981, p.194) praises Britain in the early 1900s as an 'excellent example' of retrenchment. Of course, as they are realists, this is not just an idealistic, normative appeal. Concessions are unlikely to be made in the absence of incentives for the dominant state to do so. Concessions are also unlikely if the rising power demands unreasonable concessions; this is why appeasement failed to satisfy Nazi Germany (Gilpin, 1981, p.206). Nazi Germany was, however, captured by a dangerous fascistic ideology, and as argued, China is not influenced by hypernationalism, and acts prudently. Thus far, there is no indication that China will demand unreasonable concessions. Furthermore, it is argued below that the US is suffering from imperial overstretch due to external and internal factors, and thus has an incentive to retrench.

For an incumbent hegemon, the costs of upholding the international order tend to rise faster than its resources to cover it. Internally, it suffers declining innovation rates, increasing military costs and macroeconomic imbalances where the service sector is dominant and consumption as a percentage of GDP increases (Gilpin, 1981, pp.159-168). Externally, rival states counterbalance and allies free ride at the hegemon's expense (pp.168-175). Also, economic and technological leadership diffuses to more innovative/efficient rising powers (pp.175-184). Additionally, when a state faces a permissive international environment (there are no clear, imminent threats, as is the case for a unipolar hegemon), domestic variables exert a greater influence over foreign policy—hence why the US pursued an extremely costly ideological foreign policy of liberal hegemony (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016, p.94; Mearsheimer, 2018). Classical realists describe great powers as seduced by greater and greater power, falling victim to 'great power hubris', which explains the tendency to overreach (Morgenthau, 1951, p.133; Carr, 1946, p.112; Kirshner, 2019, p.52). These factors constitute the phenomenon of 'imperial overstretch' observed by Kennedy (1988), which precedes hegemonic decline (Wohlforth, 2011).

Granted, predicting US decline is somewhat of a cliché. Waves of US 'declinist' predictions have come especially since the 1980s, all while the US has proven remarkably resilient, especially given the unipolar moment after the Cold War. This has led many to be sceptical of such claims (Wohlforth, 2014). However, there is good reason to suspect imperial overstretch in 2020. Like Gilpin, this essay conceives of imperial overstretch as an internal and external phenomenon.

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Internally, the US suffers a chronically low personal savings rate. In 2017 it lay at 8% of disposable income, which had recovered from a 2005 low of 2.5%. This is still low, however, and most of the increase comes from wealthy Americans saving more, who in turn are not investing that money heavily (Weller, 2019). Industrial production and export-led growth has declined over the past decades, and consumption as a proportion of GDP has increased from 58% in 1967 to 68% in 2019 (FRED, 2020). Fundamentally, 'the invariable symptoms of society's decline are excessive taxation, inflation, and balance-of-payments difficulties' (Gilpin, 1981, p.188). But as taxation is domestically unpopular, declining hegemony resorts to inflationary measures to try and meet fiscal commitments.[1] In classical history, currency debasement by diluting its gold content with lead was a classic inflationary measure. The modern equivalent is America's successive rounds of quantitative easing to boost anaemic growth, along with perpetually low interest rates (Casey, 2019).

Externally, facing no real threats, America pursued a recklessly costly foreign policy of liberal hegemony, becoming embroiled in quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan most notably. The cost of post-9/11 wars has reached \$6.4 trillion, according to a recent study (Crawford, 2019). The expansive map of US military bases globally remarkably resembles that of Britain amidst its decline (Kennedy, 2017).

All this contributes to the most significant problem for the US in the long term: national debt. This matters in any realist analysis because, first, debt constrains a state's ability to finance its security policies, and, second, it provides creditor nations, particularly China, with leverage over its decisions (Coggan, 2012). In sum, unsustainable debt cripples national power. America's debt-to-GDP ratio increased from 59.48% in 2000, and it is now 106.72%—over \$23 trillion (US Debt Clock, 2020). It may reach 149% in 2049 (Borak, 2019). Historically low interest rates currently mean that there is not an acute debt crisis. However, if interest rates ever rise in the future—for example, to arrest increasing inflation—America faces exponentially increasing interest payments on the existing debt, ones it probably cannot service (IMF, 2020). Undoubtedly, this eventuality would coincide with the collapse of the dollar's value. This leaves Washington's precarious debt position and entire economy at the whims of creditors, who collectively can, at any time, decide the US is no longer an attractive prospect and trigger a sovereign debt crisis (Schiff, 2014).

Despite hegemonic decline, Gilpin (1981) is fundamentally pessimistic about prospects for retrenchment, which means that hegemonic war is the usual outcome (with exceptions, of course). Retrenchment is 'politically difficult' (p.192) largely because, per se, it signals 'waning power' (p.194). Rising powers are 'stimulated to close in' and 'it can have a deteriorating effect on relations with allies' (p.194). Thus, retrenchment begins a snowball effect where the dominant power suffers continuing loss in international prestige and status. Empirically, he says, it is a course 'seldom pursued by a declining power' (p.194). Note that Gilpin is not normatively advocating against retrenchment; rather, he holds that it is regrettably uncommon.

On the contrary, retrenchment is a surprisingly feasible and common strategy. Influential research from MacDonald and Parent (2011), from a realist standpoint, examines eighteen cases of great power decline post-1870 and finds that retrenchment was pursued in between eleven and fifteen of such cases (depending on the definition of retrenchment). 40% of such cases resulted in subsequent recovery in international position and prestige in the ordinal rank of powers (p.10). Thus, despite being neorealists, they conclude with 'grounds for optimism' in relation to the coming US-China power transition (p.41). They argue that retrenchment is almost always a viable choice for declining powers, therefore emphasising the primacy of the strategic choices great powers make; the slide into hegemonic war is not predetermined. This is logically consistent with Gilpin's basic principles of international politics.

Gilpin exaggerates the extent to which retrenchment can damage international prestige. Self-restraint can in fact be a source of prestige (Kennan, 1950; 1951; Kim, 2004). Classical realists remind us of the perennial problem of great power hubris: the gross over-exercise of power beyond a state's means (Carr, 1946, p.222; Kennan, 1951, p.88; Morgenthau, 1951, p.133, p.150; Kirshner, 2019, p.59). Maintaining existing commitments in the face of economic decline presents a case of great power hubris. For the US, this means maintaining its grand strategy of deep engagement and expansive array of military bases in the Asia-Pacific which fosters a fear of encirclement in China. It is exactly this hubristic over-estimation of power that, consistent with the bargaining theory of war, can lead to disagreements over the existing distribution of power and provoke military conflict (Schweller, 2014, p.50). Classical realism would imply a dispassionate acknowledgement of emerging power realities and respecting of China's desire

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to exercise more influence in the Asia-Pacific (Kirshner, 2019, p.61). In the immediate term, the US should not inflate the threats that China poses and not become involved in one of its maritime territorial disputes, for such disputes pose little threat to American core interests (Herscovitch, 2017).

The US is well-primed for retrenchment. Indeed, no state enjoys more security than the US. According to French ambassador Jean-Jules Jusserand (cited in Schweller, 2018, p.37): 'On the north, she has a weak neighbour; on the south, another weak neighbour; on the east, fish, and the west, fish.' A de-escalation of military commitments in Asia would not compromise this security. Conversely, retrenchment would allow the US to concentrate its military on defence and enhance its security. In addition, declining empires under conditions of low vulnerability, of which the US is a paradigmatic example, tend to turn inwards and focus on domestic issues (Kupchan, 1994, pp.15-17). The election of Donald Trump is representative of an inward-looking nationalism taking hold in the US. In 2016, a Pew Poll revealed that 57% of the public believe the US should "deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with theirs the best they can" (cited in Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). Trump's 'America First' doctrine is, at least in principle, consistent with this sentiment, desirous of a retreat from global leadership. Trump has criticised, among other things, free-riding states, existing alliances, trade agreements, the costs of globalisation and military interventions (Ikenberry, 2018). Such rhetoric itself is evidence of Gilpin's analysis of hegemonic decline. In sum, Americans do not care about upholding the abstract principles of the 'rules-based liberal international order' and intervening in faraway lands in the name of human rights. It is consistent with a more prudent, narrower definition of the national interest (Schweller, 2018, p.39).

Of course, such a retreat is not necessarily a smooth process. It requires enlightened leaders to retrench prudently and pragmatically. The Trump administration's haphazard approach leaves much to be desired. To give a representative example of this trend, Defense Secretary Mark Esper stormed out of US-South Korea burden-sharing negotiations in November 2019 after unexpectedly demanding a fivefold increase (from \$1bn to \$5bn) in South Korea's contribution to the costs of hosting US troops in South Korea. This understandably provoked outrage in Seoul and, on the same day, South Korea entered talks with China to develop bilateral security ties (Ryall, 2019). There are numerous other examples. The lesson is that retrenchment should be a gradual, careful process, to avoid antagonising allies and sending them into the hands of rival powers. Additionally, retrenchment is opposed by the entrenched American foreign-policy establishment populated by liberal internationalists and neoconservatives. A restructuring of this establishment would be required (Walt, 2018).

Consequently, even though that there are imperatives to retrench, and that retrenchment is a feasible strategy, there is no guarantee that it will be followed. We thus return to Gilpin's normative appeal. Retrenchment as a mechanism of peaceful change is a viable option, but it requires the US to not submit to great power hubris, but rather, to self-reflectively acknowledge new power dynamics and retrench. Conversely, China should not be reckless in pursuing its core national interests. Although, as argued, there is little evidence to suggest it will do so, international politics is invariably uncertain and indeterminate: the future is contingent upon present choices. Nonetheless, on balance, significant military conflict seems unlikely and there are good prospects for the US progressively ceding influence to China in Asia.

Conclusion

If this is achieved, the world will neither represent a liberal dream nor an offensive realist nightmare. A truly global multipolar distribution of power may emerge, but still animated by groups competing over wealth, power and prestige. But as great powers will be reasonably sure of their security, and given the catastrophic costs of war, the repetitive cycle of hegemonic war will be broken (Schweller, 2014). In that sense, peaceful relations are likely.

This essay has applied a Gilpinian realist framework to the coming Sino-American power transition. In Section 1, the value Gilpin added to realist scholarship was covered. Subsequently, it was argued that China is a reluctantly assertive rising power, provoked predominantly by US encirclement, and not motivated by rising domestic nationalism. In Section 3, it was argued that key to peaceful change is concessions made by the dominant power in the form of retrenchment. Because the US suffers from imperial overstretch, coupled with its inward turn to focus on domestic change and the resultant desire to retreat from global leadership, there are significant forces working in

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favour of retrenchment. However, this is qualified by the erratic nature of the Trump administration's approach and the entrenched foreign-policy establishment that will resist deviation from the grand strategy of liberal hegemony. In conclusion, this essay is *cautiously optimistic* with regards to current prospects for peaceful transition—through America ceding influence to China in the Asia-Pacific without significant military conflict.

Gilpin's framework, contrary to Waltz's or Mearsheimer's, stands the test of time and is a relevant tool to analyse the coming power transition. His systematisation of systemic forces at play in international political change is a welcome departure from the discursive insights of classical realists; and, at the same time, his retention of the important element of great power choice/agency highlights the contingent nature of international relations and reveals the moral responsibility great powers have. The important alteration made here to his framework is that retrenchment is a feasible strategy; one should moderate his pessimism about peaceful change.

Note

[1] This refers to the classical definition of "inflation" as an increase in the money supply, rather than price levels.

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