Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory

Richard Ned Lebow and Benjamin Valentino

Abstract

In this paper we identify and critique the key propositions of power transition theory. We find little support for any of power transition theory’s main empirical implications. Contrary to most versions of the theory, we find that the European and international systems almost never have been characterized by hegemony. No state has achieved a position that allowed it for any extended period to order the international system to suit its interests at the expense of the other major powers. Power transitions are remarkably rare, they seldom occur as the result of differential rates of economic growth, and have most often occurred peacefully. Power transitions are more often the results of wars, rather than the causes of them. Wars between rising and dominant powers are infrequent and are not waged by either side primarily in the effort to defend or revise the international order in their favor. Finally, we find that war rarely resolves the fundamental conflicts of interest caused by power transitions.

Keywords: China, hegemonic war, measures of power, power transition

Ken Waltz grappled for his entire career with the causes of war. He made notable contributions to our understanding of this phenomenon in two seminal books. In *Man, the State, and War* he made the case for war as a system-level phenomenon. In *Theory of International Politics*, he developed a system-level theory to account for hegemonic wars. In this paper, we address a related but distinct system-level explanation for war: power transition theories.

Although interest in power transition theory appears to have waned among scholars of international relations theory since the 1980s, the theory has become an accepted framework for many scholars and policymakers who focus on Asia. Since the end of the Cold War, the debate about the future of Asian security relations has been dominated by the question of a possible armed conflict between the United States and a rising China. Those who raise the prospect of war almost always explicitly or implicitly invoke variants of power transition theory to justify their pessimism. Former Assistant Secretary of State Susan Shirk summed up this perspective: ‘History teaches us that rising powers are likely to provoke war.’

Given the continued prominence of power transition theories in the realist paradigm, and their widespread application to US–Chinese relations, the time is ripe to ask whether their claims to anticipate and explain great power wars are justified. We identify and evaluate the empirical basis for seven implications of power transition theories. Our failure to find strong empirical support for these
implications does not mean that conflict between the United States and China is improbable, only that power transition theory cannot provide a basis for any kind of expectation to the contrary.

The remainder of this paper is divided into two principal sections. First, we briefly describe the two dominant power transition theories – those of Organski and Kugler and Gilpin – and identify several key empirical implications of these theories. In the second section, we evaluate the historical evidence for these implications using historical data on GDP and population, as well as case-specific historical evidence. We conclude the paper with some observations about the causes of great power wars and the implications of our findings for current debates about the likelihood of war between the United States and China.

Power transition theories

Organski and Kugler attempt to distinguish themselves from realists by asserting that power transition theory regards the international system as more ordered than anarchic. This is the result of the ability of the dominant power to impose its preferences on other actors. Over time, habits and patterns are established and states learn what to expect from one another. ‘Certain nations are recognized as leaders … Trade is conducted along recognized channels … Diplomatic relations also fall into recognized patterns … There are rules of diplomacy; there are even rules of war.’ This order advances the wealth, security and prestige of the dominant power, but typically at the expense of the other great powers. Dominance is seldom absolute and war is accordingly still possible. The most serious wars are those between dominant powers and dissatisfied challengers. The latter are states which ‘have grown to full power after the existing international order was fully established and the benefits already allocated’. The dominant nation and its supporters are generally unwilling to grant the newcomers more than a small part of the advantages they derive from the status quo. Rising powers are often dissatisfied and make war to impose orders more favorable to themselves. War is most likely and of greatest magnitude when a dissatisfied challenger and the dominant power enter into approximate power parity.

Organski and Kugler advance a relatively mechanical and deterministic account of the conditions under which war occurs:

The fundamental problem that sets the whole system sliding almost irretrievably toward war is the differences in rates of growth among the great powers and, of particular importance, the differences in rates between the dominant nation and the challenger that permit the latter to overtake former in power. It is this leapfrogging that destabilizes the system.

They identify five wars of hegemonic transitions: the Napoleonic, the Franco-Prussian, the Russo-Japanese and both World Wars.
Robert Gilpin’s *War and Change in World Politics* also stresses the relative balance of military power between leading states and would-be challengers as a major cause of great power warfare. Gilpin focuses more on declining than rising powers. Dominant states make cumulative commitments that eventually exceed their capabilities. Imperial overstretch ‘creates challenges for the dominant states and opportunities for the rising states of the system’. The latter aspire to remake ‘the rules governing the international system, the spheres of influence, and most important of all, the international distribution of territory’. Dominant states see preventive war as the most attractive means of eliminating the threat posed by challengers. Other possible responses are reducing commitments, reducing costs by further expansion, alliances, rapprochements and appeasing challengers.

Hegemonic wars for Gilpin pit dominant powers against challengers. Such wars reorder the system; they extend the dominant power’s control or allow a successful challenger to impose its own order. Hegemonic wars tend to be waged *à outrance* and draw in most, if not all, great powers. As examples, Gilpin offers the Peloponnesian War, the Second Punic War, the Thirty Years War, the wars of Louis XIV, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and World Wars I and II.

Virtually all of the efforts to test power transition theory have focused on confirming or disconfirming the correlation between power transitions and great power war. Scholars have tested the theory using different measures of power, different time periods and different regions. Yet for Organski and Kugler, as we noted, changes in the balance of power represent only half the equation. The rising power must be dissatisfied with the status quo before it is willing to risk war to change it. Only recently have scholars attempted to measure challenger dissatisfaction. Kim maintains that dissatisfaction with the status quo is a more important indicator of war than the power balance, a finding supported by Lemke and Werner. Werner and Kugler try to capture dissatisfaction by looking for extraordinary military buildups. Kim looks at this relationship from the reverse perspective, arguing that there is a strong relationship between power parity and dissatisfaction. Lemke and Reed use alliance portfolios as their measure.

These measures are inappropriate for evaluating the theories and their principal variables. Military buildups can be implemented for many purposes and directed against many parties. They say nothing per se about dissatisfaction with the system and its governing rules and norms. Kim’s approach is to make dissatisfaction a function of the power balance and thus deny it any independent status as a variable. Most importantly, all of these measures verge upon tautology, as Oneal, de Soysa and Park note, because they are inherently related to the behavior that is to be explained – warfare.

Few scholars have examined the core causal assertions of power transition theory. For example, we know of only one study that investigates the foundational claim that dominant powers actually have the capability to control the distribution of private goods in the international system. It finds that power transition theories greatly exaggerate the power of leading states to impose their preferences on the system.
In an effort to more carefully examine the causal mechanisms of power transition theory we employ multiple but simple tests. First, we identify seven key implications of power transition theories. Second, we examine these implications empirically, drawing on historical data on the relative capabilities of the great powers from 1640 to the present, as well as several key cases – wars that Organski and Kugler and Gilpin claim to be caused by power transition – to determine whether it is reasonable to conclude that these wars resulted from the causal processes identified by power transition theory.

**Empirical implications**

1. At any given time the international system is dominated by a single power capable of imposing to a significant extent its preferred form of order on the system.
2. Dominant powers impose orders beneficial primarily to their own security and material well-being.
3. The more beneficial the international order to the dominant power, the less likely this order is to benefit other states, especially rising powers.
4. Power transitions between major powers are the result of differential rates of economic growth and have occurred with some frequency, at least in modern Europe.
5. Rising powers go to war against dominant powers or are attacked by them before they are capable of initiating a successful military challenge.
6. When hegemonic states and rising powers go to war, they do so primarily in the effort to defend or revise the international order in their favor.
7. War effectively resolves the conflicts of interest caused by power transitions.

Examining the empirical implications of power transition theory

*Implication 1: The international system is dominated by a single power capable of imposing order*

Organski and Kugler insist that international relations is characterized by a hierarchical system with a dominant power at the top and great, middle and small powers beneath it.21 Gilpin maintains that hegemony imposed by a dominant power has been the ordering principle of the international system since the onset of the industrial revolution.22 By dominant or hegemonic power, these authors mean a state that is so much more powerful than others that it has the capability to impose order on the system in the form of rules governing interstate trade and the conduct of war and peace. Organski and Kugler acknowledge that dominance is never absolute, but assert it is sufficient to impose a hierarchical order. It is important to distinguish their understanding of a dominant from what other scholars might call a leading great power: a state that is *primus inter pares* but not strong enough relative to others to impose its preferred order on the international system.

In fact, there is little empirical evidence for the existence of dominant powers in the modern state system. Kaufman, Little and Wohlforth date the modern European
system from 1500. For 41 of the decades the system has been in existence it was multipolar, for eight bipolar, and for one unipolar. Over the last 500 years, numerous powers have tried and failed to impose their preferences on the system. These powers include Spain in the sixteenth century, France in the seventeenth and again in the early nineteenth, Germany twice in the first half of the twentieth and the United States in the post-Cold War era. The United States aside, all would-be hegemons were defeated in long, costly, and often multiple wars, by coalitions of other great powers. At best, bids for hegemony have been temporarily successful and geographically restricted. Following the defeat of Prussia in 1806 and the Treaty of Tilsit, imposed on Russia the following year, Napoleon was able to create a short-lived French-dominated continental order. Germany achieved a brief hegemony in the east following the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and more widely a generation later after overrunning and occupying most of Europe in the early years of World War II.

The most enduring hegemons have been colonial empires. The European powers, the Ottomans, the United States and Japan imposed their preferences within the territories they conquered or controlled. After 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union did so to varying degrees in their respective ‘blocs’. Whether influence was exercised directly or more informally, there can be little doubt that these orders benefited the dominant powers, generally at the expense of subordinated peoples and their economies. But power transition theories focus on the subordination of other major powers to the hegemon, not minor powers like those in Latin America and Eastern Europe. As Belgium and Portugal demonstrate, a state need not be a hegemon to establish a colonial empire.

To the extent that the European regional system or the international system more generally has been to any degree ordered it has been the result of negotiated compromises between multiple powers. These usually followed destructive wars. Examples include the orders established by Westphalia, the Peace of Utrecht’s settlement, the Congress of Vienna and the Versailles Peace Conference. The 1945 San Francisco Conference created the United Nations. Its charter embodied numerous compromises to accommodate the Soviet Union, traditional great powers like Britain and France, and even smaller powers, mostly European and Latin American. China was recognized as a great power, even though it was not at the time.

**Implication 2: Dominant powers impose orders beneficial primarily to themselves**

Aspiring hegemons have repeatedly tried to impose self-interested international orders but have consistently failed. This outcome is attributable in the first instance to the distribution of power within Europe and the international system. Since Rome, there has never been a European state powerful and fortunate enough – with the possible exception of Charlemagne’s short-lived empire – to impose its preferences unilaterally on others.

The second reason has to do with the nature of hegemonic rule. It is by definition a tyranny which cannot gain legitimacy unless it transforms itself into some other kind of order. At best, true hegemons must impose control through a combination of force, threats of force and deals with local elites who benefit from outside support.
Communist rule in Eastern Europe, for example, rested on an alliance between the Soviet Union and local bureaucracies, parties and armies. The leaders of these local institutions were overwhelmingly drawn from peasant backgrounds and experienced considerable upward mobility under communism. Self-interest and political preservation made many of them loyal to the Soviet Union.24

Negotiated and compromise orders offer something to most, if not all, major powers. The Westphalian system ended destructive religious wars and recognized the political and religious authority of princes, Catholic or Protestant, within their own realms. The Congress of Vienna restored the Bourbons to the French throne and created a ‘Holy Alliance’ against the twin threats of revolutionary change and French revisionism. Versailles brought into being or recognized de facto successor states of three former empires and rewarded the major victors with territory, colonies and reparations.

Even losing powers are not always losers at peace settlements. Westphalia, Utrecht and the Congress of Vienna legitimized changes in the territorial status quo but did not inflict draconian punishments on defeated major powers. The exceptions are the settlement of the Franco-Prussian War and the Congress of Versailles. The former transferred the French province of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany and imposed a major indemnity, leaving France somewhat of a revanchist power, although one that had become largely reconciled to the territorial status quo by the first decade of the twentieth century. The latter took substantial territory from Germany, denied the much desired Anschluss between it and Austria and imposed hefty reparations. It made Germany accept responsibility for the war, hand over its battle fleet and limit the size of its postwar armed forces – terms that rankled Germans as much, if not more, than their territorial losses.25 The Soviet Union was also denied any of the benefits of the settlement and was for some time excluded altogether from political and economic relations with most of the rest of Europe by means of a cordon sanitaire. Japan received territorial compensation but remained a revisionist power. For the first time in the aftermath of a major European peace settlement, revisionist great powers outnumbered satisfied ones. The United States, the leading status quo power, withdrew into quasi-isolation. In these circumstances, it was only a matter of time before the revisionist powers challenged the territorial status quo.

Let us suppose that there were dominant states, as defined by Organski and Kugler. In these circumstances, not only rising powers, but most, if not all, the other great powers, would be seriously dissatisfied with the status quo. We should expect to see coalitions form against the dominant power. These coalitions would be more likely still if there was a clear rising power around which they might coalesce. This is a different pattern than that predicted by power transition theories.

Implication 3: The more beneficial the international order to the dominant power, the less it benefits other states

Organski and Kugler define a rising and dissatisfied power as one with at least 80 percent of the capability of the dominant power. If no such states exist, they consider the contenders to be the next ‘three strongest states in the system’.26 Houweling and
Siccama, along with de Soysa, Oneal and Park, point to a problematic connection between Organski and Kugler’s two principal variables: relative power and status quo evaluations.27 This is disputed by Lemke and Reed who claim that ‘power transition theory does not assume, argue, or suggest that the power a nation obtains or enjoys predetermines its evaluation of the status quo’.28 If so, power transition theorists must specify the conditions under which states, rising or otherwise, will or will not be reconciled to the status quo.

Organski and Kugler depict the international hierarchy as a pyramidal structure, maintained largely by force or the threat of force, which benefits those at the apex at the expense of the satisfaction of other powers.29 In practice, international orders are not nearly such ‘zero sum’ games. Other great and rising powers are not necessarily denied the benefits of the existing system. As we argued above, this is because no modern state has had the ability to impose an international order without making significant compromises to other major actors. Thus, even a quasi-hierarchical order of the kind imposed by imperial China in the Pacific rim, or the United States on the defeated Axis powers in the aftermath of World War II, gained powerful adherents. The United States extended its security umbrella over Germany, Italy and Japan and assumed a disproportionate share of the burden of common defense, allowing a fair degree of free riding in both countries. This arrangement freed funds for much needed postwar reconstruction, which was further facilitated by American credits and investment. As Germany and Japan grew in economic strength vis-à-vis the United States, hegemonic stability theorists expected them to challenge the postwar economic order organized and maintained by the United States.30 Instead, they remained its strongest supporters because of the benefits they derived from the status quo. Whatever gains they might have made by challenging the system were not worth the risks this entailed.

**Implication 4: Power transitions occur periodically and result from differential rates of economic growth**

To attribute war to power transitions presupposes transitions. There is no consensus on the measurement of power, and therefore how to identify if and when transitions have occurred between major powers. Since power transition theories suggest that differential rates of growth are by themselves a cause of war, we believe it essential to exclude possibly endogenous measures, such as actual military capabilities, from any measure of power. These capabilities reflect state choices about how to direct their resources, not their latent potential for war making. Some scholars investigating power transitions have utilized the Correlates of War composite index of national capabilities, which includes the number of military personnel and military expenditures.31 Measured in this way, power transitions could be an effect of war (or of the prospect of war) rather than a cause. In other words, a state might become more powerful than its adversary because of investments made in preparation for a war decided upon for other reasons. Even lagging these measures does not eliminate the possibility of endogeneity, since most European major powers have viewed war as a constant feature of the international system.
Organski and Kugler circumvent this problem by relying on GNP as their sole measure of state power. Although this measure avoids endogeneity, it represents an incomplete measure of state power. We believe that a state’s total population is also critical to its latent military power, since population is a key determinant of a state’s ability to mobilize military forces. For most of history, the size of a state’s army has been the single most important factor in determining success or failure on the battlefield. States with large populations can compensate for lower GDPs by fielding more troops; states with higher GDPs can compensate for lower populations by equipping their armies with more effective weaponry or hiring mercenaries.

To test this implication of power transition theory, we have chosen to examine the frequency and character of power transitions in interstate relations between 1648 and 2000. The Peace of Westphalia is the most widely recognized date for the beginning of the modern state system. We nevertheless acknowledge a certain arbitrariness to our anchor point. Schuman and Levy date the modern system from the end of the fifteenth century. Other scholars do not consider a modern state system to have emerged until the end of the seventeenth century or even the mid-eighteenth century. Hinsley and Osiander argue that Westphalia merely set up a legal structure for a modern state system, which helped it subsequently to emerge. We have chosen 1648 as a good intermediary date and one that omits the series of conflicts known collectively as the Thirty Years War. Although dynastic or state interests were sometimes paramount in the wars that constituted this conflict, they were often subordinated to religious considerations, making European international relations distinct from the pattern that emerged after the settlements of Westphalia and the Treaty of the Pyrenees.

To create a single measure of state power we multiply each country’s GDP by its total population. Measures of both GDP and population were derived from data compiled by Angus Maddison. In the case of empires, the GDP and populations of contiguous territories were included. Figures 1–4 plot the evolving distribution of power in Europe (plus the United States and Japan) from 1640 to 2000.

Some might object that this measure puts too much weight on population, overestimating the power of very populous states such as Russia while underestimating the power of smaller states such as Britain. Indeed, with at least 70 percent more citizens than the next most populous European state Russia had by far the largest population in Europe throughout this period. Since at least 1648, however, GDP and population have been very closely correlated, at least among the great powers. This relationship is robust because prior to 1900 the economic productivity of the major powers, Britain aside, derived principally from agriculture, and agricultural productivity was largely a function of population. Thus Russia not only had the largest population in Europe, but the largest GDP from the mid-1700s to the mid-1800s. Russia’s GDP never dropped below the third-highest in Europe (excluding the United States and Japan) during the entire period.

Our measure of power seems to accord reasonably well with outcomes in international affairs. Although Russia was not always victorious in its wars, it never suffered a long-term loss of a substantial proportion of its territory or population.
Measured in square miles, Russia’s territory (even excluding its Siberian territories) increased by more than any other European power from 1640 to 1950. Wohlforth argues that ‘Russia is by some measures the most successful imperial enterprise in history.’ It would be difficult to argue that Britain did better during this period. Britain controlled a vast amount of territory abroad and enjoyed naval supremacy. However, it never controlled substantial territory in Europe and never conquered another major European power on its own. When major rebellions occurred in its colonies, first in America and later in Ireland and India, it was not able to defeat them.

Our measure reveals three patterns that are especially anomalous for power transition theory. First, contrary to most understandings of power transition theory, power transitions between the top and second-ranked powers are extremely rare. From 1640 to 1950 there is only one power transition involving European states. It occurred around 1715 when Russia surpassed the Spanish Empire as the most powerful state in Europe following the Wars of Spanish Succession. It has maintained this lead

Figure 1  State power 1640–1740
ever since. Russia’s lead over France grew from 14 percent in 1720 to more than 260 percent that of France’s power in 1865, at which point France was surpassed by the United Kingdom. If we include the United States as an actor in the European theater, we add a second power transition in 1895 when the United States surpassed Russia. It is important to note that neither of these transitions involved war.

Second, even transitions among lower-ranking great powers are rare. When they do occur they seldom result in a substantial, lasting shift in the balance of power between states. Apart from the transition between Russia and the Spanish Empire, there are no power transitions between major powers in the century from 1640 to 1740 (Figure 1). From 1740 to 1840 (Figure 2) the only power transition between European great powers occurs when the UK surpassed Prussia in the late 1700s (and then only by a few percentage points). The period between 1845 and 1950 includes several more transitions, although, with the partial exceptions of the rise of Germany and Austria-Hungary starting around 1870, none of these produce a significant advantage in power for the rising state. Only the rise of the United States, which moved from the fifth-strongest great power in 1840 to the strongest in 1895, produced the kind of

Figure 2  State power 1740–1840
power shift that could plausibly provide a state with a qualitatively different ability to influence international outcomes.

Third, almost all major power transitions appear to be the result of war, not a cause of it. This pattern is most evident in transitions associated with rapidly declining powers. The Spanish Empire was far and away the strongest power in Europe until it all but dissolved following a series of wars in the early 1700s. Likewise, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire following the First World War wiped two major powers from the map of Europe. These powerful empires collapsed as a result of wars waged primarily with states for which there was no possibility of imminent transition. Rising powers owe much to war, but it is only a partial explanation for their ascent. The rapid rise in the power of Germany and Italy in the latter half of the nineteenth century was primarily a result of wars of unification. The rise of the United States may again be an exception, although only if one excludes the wars against Indian tribes and nations.

Figure 3  State power 1845–1950
Implication 5: Rising powers attack dominant powers or vice versa

Power transition theory focuses on war between the two most powerful states in the international system. These wars are inherently risky so leaders must be highly motivated to start them. Rising powers must feel excluded from the system and denied its rewards and convinced that military challenges are likely meet with success. Dominant powers must believe that a rising challenger threatens not only their standing in the system but their security and material interests. Leaders must be confident of mobilizing domestic support for a war. They must exploit existing rivalries to ensure that they can face the dominant power with the support, or at least the neutrality, of major third parties. None of these conditions are easy to achieve, and collectively require political skill and fortuitous conditions. Moreover, these conditions must be met during the window when the rising power perceives itself, or is perceived by the dominant power, to be pulling abreast in military capability. Perceptions of the changing balance of power may be a necessary, but far from sufficient condition, for the kind of wars predicted by power transition theories.

Strategically, it makes more sense for rising powers to attack smaller powers or former great powers in serious decline – although such wars are not the subject of
power transition theory. Elsewhere Lebow finds strong evidence for this pattern. For the same reason it usually makes more sense for leading powers to attack targets of opportunity (i.e. lesser and declining powers) as a means of augmenting their power. They may then be in a stronger position to deter or buy off a challenger. The most recent manifestation of this pattern may be the American attack on Iraq, urged on the Bush administration by many neoconservatives as a way of ‘locking in’ American hegemony in the expectation of a possible future challenge from China. By far the most sensible policy for leading powers in dealing with rising powers ought to be efforts to moderate their challenge by incorporating them into the system if they are outside it, or, if they are inside, to provide more symbolic and material benefits to reconcile them to the status quo. Historically, this is how European great powers responded to the rise of Sweden, Russia, Prussia, Germany, Japan and Italy. From the 1960s on it was a key component of the Western response to the Soviet Union.

We should accordingly expect to find relatively few wars between dominant and rising powers. What wars that occur should result from motives unrelated to power transitions or from miscalculation: a dominant or rising power initiating what it thinks will be an isolated war against a third party that escalates into a wider struggle involving rising and dominant powers on opposing sides. Louis XIV’s Dutch War (1672–9), the Nine Years War (1688–97), the War of Spanish Succession (1701–14) and World War I all arguably fit this pattern. In each instance, a dominant power thought incorrectly that it could extend its power at relatively low cost.

Implication 6: Hegemonic states and rising powers go to war to defend or revise the international order

Power transition theorists have been surprisingly reluctant to engage historical cases in an effort to show that wars between great powers have actually resulted from the motives described by their theories. Organski and Kugler identify five wars they claim their theory should explain: the Napoleonic, the Franco-Prussian and the Russo-Japanese Wars, and World Wars I and II. They exclude the Napoleonic War from their study on the grounds that there is insufficient data on the power capabilities of the participants. They exclude the Franco-Prussian War and the Russo-Japanese War because they maintain they were fought without allies. They are left with two cases, both of which they insist resulted from the motives postulated by power transition theory, but they offer no historical evidence to support their assertion.

The Peloponnesian War is the only conflict for which Gilpin attempts to marshal evidence to show that the war resulted from power transition dynamics. Quoting Thucydides, he asserts that it was a preventive war initiated by Sparta. Gilpin calls the war a ‘hegemonic war’, defined as a conflict between or among great powers, arising from growing disequilibria in power and fought with few limitations. Hegemonic wars, he argues, result from the perception by one or more of the great powers that ‘a fundamental historical change is taking place and the gnawing fear … that time is somehow beginning to work against it and that one should settle matters
through preemptive war while the advantage is still on one’s side’. Gilpin offers seven additional examples of hegemonic war: the Second Punic War, the Thirty Years War, the wars of Louis XIV, the French and Napoleonic Wars and World Wars I and II. ‘At issue in each of these great conflicts’, Gilpin writes, ‘was the governance of the international system.’ It is difficult to evaluate the appropriateness of several of the wars on Gilpin’s list: the Thirty Years War describes multiple wars between multiple European powers, Louis XIV was involved in several wars, and it is not clear which Gilpin intends to include, and the French Revolutionary Wars ought reasonably to be broken down into the wars of the First through the Seventh Coalition.

Neither Organski and Kugler nor Gilpin does much more than assert a fit between cases and theories. For Organski and Kugler, World Wars I and II qualify because they occurred before the power of the coalition of challengers could overtake that of the coalition led by the dominant country. They offer no evidence that the initiators of these conflicts understood the balance of capabilities and likely changes the same way as ‘objective observers’ (i.e. the authors) did, or that they went to war for reasons having anything to do with the balance of capabilities. The Peloponnesian War aside, Gilpin does not discuss in detail any of the wars he attributes to power transition. He does not identify the combatants or the initiators or provide estimates of the balance of capabilities and expected changes in its direction. He makes no attempt to show that the initiators went to war because they feared future defeat if they remained at peace.

Gilpin’s account of the origins of the Peloponnesian War is certainly not the only interpretation of the war. He draws heavily on Thucydides but ignores the extraordinary complexity of this text and the ways in which the narrative of Book I undercuts Thucydides’ authorial statement earlier in the same book. Thucydides’ understanding of the underlying causes of the Peloponnesian War has little to do with power transition in the sense understood by Gilpin. As Lebow argues, a more nuanced reading of Thucydides indicates that Spartiates felt threatened by Athens’ rising prestige, not its military power, and went to war to protect their identity, not their security. Spartan identity was sustained by hegemony in Greece, with hegemony (hēgemonia) being an honorific title conferred on a polis by other city states for its accomplishments on behalf of the community as a whole. Athens had gained co-hegemony not only for its military valor against the invading Persians but for its cultural and economic accomplishments. The latter were achievements that Sparta’s near-subsistence economy could not hope to match. This threatened to make it a backwater in a rapidly modernizing Hellas. The ‘war party’ in Sparta, led by the ephor Sthenelaidas, made light of Athenian power, expecting to triumph over Athens in a single set-piece battle in front of the wall of their city. Revealingly, the ‘peace party’, led by King Archidamus, had a more accurate understanding of Athenian military and economic power, and sought to avoid war on the grounds ‘that we may leave it as a legacy to our children; so improbable is it that the Athenian spirit will be the slave of their land, or Athenian experience be cowed by war’. Most of the literature on power transition that follows Organski and Gilpin makes notable efforts to devise measures of capability and other indicators of power.
but devotes little attention to validating their claims by examining the motives, calculations and decisions of historical actors. A careful look at post-1648 wars offered in evidence by Gilpin and Organski and Kugler indicates that none of these conflicts can persuasively be attributed to power transition.

The two principal wars of Louis XIV were motivated primarily by the French king’s insatiable quest for gloire. Louis had little concern for the power of neighboring states and insufficient awareness of the likelihood that they would combine against him. The French Revolutionary Wars were initially motivated by fear and hatred of a revolutionary regime, not by concern for a changing balance of power. Austria, Prussia and Britain, the leaders of the First Coalition (1792–7) falsely expected their war against revolutionary France to be a cakewalk. Subsequent French offensives were motivated by a desire to export the revolution, and Napoleon’s wars against the Rhenish states and Prussia (1806), and his invasion of Russia (1812), were pure wars of expansion, not of preemption or prevention. Neither our measures of power nor accepted historical interpretations of the initiators’ motives for the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars are congruent with power transition theories.

World War I is frequently described as a preventive war by international relations theorists, but rarely by historians. The power transition claim rests on Germany’s alleged fear of Russia and corresponding need to implement the so-called Schlieffen Plan before Russian railway construction and mobilization reforms (the former financed by France) made it unworkable, leaving Germany vulnerable to invasion of two fronts. But as Figure 3 indicates, Russia was substantially more powerful than Germany before 1914; it had a roughly equivalent GDP and more than twice the population. Although Russia’s railroad and mobilization programs might have made it more prepared for war in the immediate future, they did not affect the long-term balance of power between Germany and Russia.

New historical evidence further undermines the long problematic claim that Germany was motivated to go to war in 1914 by concern for Russia’s rising power. Germany’s chief-of-staff Helmuth von Moltke wanted war for reasons that had little to do with strategic calculations. He hated France and sought war as a means of upholding and strengthening the Junker aristocracy and its values against the rising commercial classes and the growing appeal of materialism. Military exercises indicated that Moltke’s offensive strategy was unlikely to defeat France but that a good defense could handily repel, if not crush, a combined French and Russian assault. Moltke withheld this information from the Chancellor and the Kaiser and played up Germany’s need to conduct an offensive before 1917 in the hope of stampeding them into war. The Chancellor was influenced by Moltke, but the Kaiser – the real decision-maker in Berlin – was inclined to draw his sword after Sarajevo for reasons of honor and self-validation.

World War II is an equally problematic case for power transition. Hitler’s war in the west and invasion of the Soviet Union were not driven by a fear of growing Russian or French power. Indeed, Hitler rejected the utility of conventional measures of military and economic power, emphasizing instead the determining influence of will power,
morale, leadership and racial purity. Hitler did (irrationally) fear the encirclement of Germany by France, Britain and Russia, a situation he brought about by his military aggression. He saw Germany’s advantage over these countries in the late 1930s as fleeting, not because they were growing faster than Germany, but because none of them had fully mobilized the latent power they possessed, and because he saw a passing opportunity to divide his enemies and defeat them piecemeal.

Beyond Hitler’s recognition that he could not challenge the United States before becoming the undisputed master of Europe, there is little indication that longer-term estimates of the balance of power between Germany and its adversaries entered into his calculations. This is equally true for Mussolini, a rank opportunist. His goal was colonial expansion in the Mediterranean and Africa, and his attack on France was motivated by his belief that Hitler would win the war and that Italy had to join him to gain any spoils. Japan possessed powerful military forces but nothing close to the power capabilities of either the Soviet Union or the United States. Its occupation of Manchuria and invasion of China were classic imperialism and more influenced by domestic politics than strategic calculations. Its attack on the United States and other colonial powers in the Pacific was initiated in the unreasonable expectation that Washington would seek a negotiated peace after sharp setbacks, and that in the absence of American support China would also come to terms. To the extent that timing was critical, it was the tactical calculation that within years the Western embargo on oil would make it impossible for Japan to wage a naval war.

Implication 7: War effectively resolves the conflicts of interest caused by power transitions

For power transition theories, war serves the function of finalizing or continuing one state’s dominance over another, leaving the victorious state in a better position to impose or maintain a favorable international order. However, none of the wars cited by power transition theorists resulted in the long-term reduction of the vanquished state’s power.

As noted, Organski and Kugler identify five power transition wars: the Napoleonic, the Franco-Prussian and the Russo-Japanese Wars, and World Wars I and II. France was defeated in 1815 by a coalition of power. The victors stripped France of its conquests but made little effort to permanently dismember or weaken it; their primary goal was to restore the monarchy and do so under conditions that would help it gain legitimacy. France accordingly maintained its superiority in power over Britain and Prussia until 1870. Germany’s superiority over France increased following the Franco-Prussian War, but as Figure 2 indicates, this had more to do with the increasing rate of growth of German power than any reduction in France’s rate of growth or its loss of Alsace-Lorraine. Indeed, in the 25 years after the war France’s power continued to grow at roughly the same rate as it did in the 25 years before, or even faster. Russia suffered a major defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, but its superiority over Japan actually increased after the war. Germany’s power was only temporarily reduced by the First World War despite its loss of considerable territory. Even after
Germany’s crushing defeat and partition at the end of World War II, West Germany alone again surpassed France and Britain in total power by 1960.

The collapse of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I are the only exceptions to this pattern. Austria was unambiguously an initiator in World War I, and the Ottoman Empire entered in the hope of gaining spoils. The war destroyed both empires. Since Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were the fifth- and seventh-ranked powers in Europe respectively, it also seems unlikely that their demise would have substantially increased the ability of the victorious allies to impose their preferences on the system as a whole, as power transition theories expect.

War has not solved power transition problems because most wars do not significantly degrade the basic sources of the vanquished state’s power: its GDP and population. The bloodiest wars seldom kill more than 1–2 percent of a combatant country’s population. Even more devastating population losses can be recovered quickly. Russia lost perhaps 25 million citizens in World War II, but its population rebounded and surpassed its pre-war levels by 1956.

The only way by which war can reduce a state’s long-term power is through permanent partition, dissolution, or conquest and occupation of territories containing a large fraction of its population and economic resources. A few states have pursued such aims (e.g. Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany), but have not achieved them. Because conquering and controlling large populations is so difficult, long-term conquest is rarely the outcome of war between two states of roughly equal power – the kind of states that power transition theories expect to go to war.

Conclusions

Our data offer no support for power transition theories. Since 1648, no power has been in a position to impose its preferences on other actors and to dictate the rules of war and peace. Power transitions involving leading powers are rare. They are hardly ever the result of gradual differences in economic growth rates, as power transition theories expect them to be. Our only examples of such transitions are the United States overtaking Russia in the late nineteenth century and China overtaking the United States in the late twentieth century – neither of which involved a war.

Leading states often aspire to the status of a dominant power. Many are not content with their position and advantages and attempt to gain more power through further conquests, and by means of their augmented power impose their preferences on others. Habsburg Spain, France under Louis XIV and Napoleon, Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany and the United States in the post-Cold War era are all cases in point. None of these states were seriously threatened by rising powers or coalitions of great powers. They went to war because they thought they were powerful enough to become more powerful still. The perception of strength, not of weakness and threat, is the precondition for many, if not most, superpower wars.
Our evidence indicates a pattern of conflict that is virtually the reverse of that predicted by power transition theories. Great power wars arise in the absence of hegemony, not because of it. These wars lead to power transitions and peace settlements that often impose new orders by virtue of a consensus among the leading powers. These orders are never dictated by a single power and endure as long as a consensus holds among the major powers responsible for upholding them.

Power transition theories make very narrow claims. They attempt to explain a small subset of war: so-called hegemonic wars. A good theory of war would have to account for these conflicts and other kinds of wars as well. It is not our goal here to lay the foundations for such a theory, but we do want to highlight two findings that strike us as relevant to such an enterprise. The first is the pattern of adversaries against which leading and rising powers make war. With a few notable exceptions, leading powers avoid intentionally challenging other great powers. They generally prefer to make war against smaller third parties and once great but now seriously declining great powers, although they have frequently been drawn into war with other great powers when these smaller wars have escalated. Rising powers devote a high proportion of their income to their armed forces and wage frequent wars of expansion. In the period under discussion, Prussia, Russia, Germany and Japan generally avoided attacking leading powers, their preference being once again for smaller third parties and once great but declining powers. Even the United States when it was a rising power conformed to this pattern, making war against Spain and Mexico.

It is important to distinguish between power and perceptions of power. Our raw measure of power, based on population and GDP, shows considerable stability in the European rankings of leading powers. Figure 5 shows that Spain’s dominance in the post-Westphalia period gave way to Russia in the early 1700s, which was not surpassed by the United States until 1895. The United States maintained its position as a leading power until China overtook it in the 1980s.

This ranking of leading powers bears at best a passing relationship to contemporary perceptions of leading powers represented by the lower line in Figure 5. By most accounts, France was perceived as the leading power from the early seventeenth century until the defeat of Napoleon. Later, Britain and Germany were perceived as leading powers. Yet Russia remained the leading power by objective measures for this entire period. The perception that the United States was the world’s leading power did not take hold until the end of World War I, close to 30 years after it became the most powerful state by our measure, and has continued for almost three decades after it was surpassed by China.

What accounts for this discrepancy between power and perception? We do not believe it is simply an artifact of our measure, which is the most objective representation of latent material capabilities available. Rather, we believe the discrepancy is attributable to agency. Different leaders or elites pursue different goals and devote widely varying fractions of their available income to military power. In pursuit of gloire, Louis XIV devoted extraordinary resources to his military, putting himself and his country deeply into debt. Prussia under the Hohenzollerns did the same. Frederick the Great spent over 90 percent of Prussia’s income on his military,
a figure way out of line with that spent by the great powers of his day. In 2008, the United States, the modern-day Prussia, spent $417 billion on defense. This amounted to 47 percent of the world total defense expenditures, although US GDP is only about 20 percent of world GDP. Great powers that spend disproportionately on the military and use it to make conquests stand out among their peers and can achieve leading power status in their eyes even if this status is not warranted by their capabilities. For purposes of status and balancing, perceptions of power appear more important than actual power or capabilities, just as perceptions of threat are more important than perceptions of power.

Also striking is general ignorance among leaders and the media of the actual power balance – as opposed to the military balance. There has been much discussion among US policy-makers and in the US media of the rising power of China and concern that it could challenge the United States at some point in the not too distant future. There has been no recognition that the transition between China and the United States actually occurred several decades ago. China’s military power does not reflect its latent power, and this is largely a matter of choice. China’s defense expenditures, while rising rapidly in the last several years, have remained well below those of the United States, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of China’s GDP for decades. China’s material capabilities have not given it the power to restructure the international
system in its favor, let alone conquer a great power like the United States. As we noted above, no state in the last 350 years has achieved this kind of hegemony. China, however, is already more than powerful enough to deny the United States the ability to conquer it, or even control the international agenda in Asia. More importantly, no conceivable war with China will long divert it from its path to power since, apart perhaps from a full-scale nuclear conflict, no war could permanently diminish its population or undermine its productivity.

Should war come between the United States and China in the future it will not be a result of a power transition. The greater risk is that conflict will result from the misperception that such a transition is imminent, and the miscalculation by decision-makers in the United States (or China) that China will soon be in a position to do what no state has done before – unilaterally dictate the rules of the international system. Power transition theory would be made self-fulfilling – generating its own corroboration where history has failed to oblige. Power transition is not unique in this respect. Realism, more generally, may be to some degree self-fulfilling. Security discourses in China and elsewhere in Asia – much more than in Europe – tend to take its fundamental propositions as verities. It would be ironic if US–China relations deteriorated because each power based its expectations on theories that lack empirical validation.

Notes

8 Organski and Kugler, The War Ledger, p. 61.
10 Gilpin, War and Change in International Relations, p. 186.
11 Gilpin, War and Change in International Relations, p. 187.
12 Gilpin, War and Change in International Relations, pp. 191–3.
13 Gilpin, War and Change in International Relations, p. 198.
14 Gilpin, War and Change in International Relations, p. 200.


22 Gilpin, *War and Change in International Relations*, p. 144.


26 Organ and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, p. 44.


28 Gilpin, *War and Change in International Relations*, pp. 6–8.


31 Gilpin, *War and Change in International Relations*, pp. 57–8.


35 Missing data were filled by interpolation.


43 Gilpin, *War and Change in International Relations*, p. 191.

44 Gilpin, *War and Change in International Relations*, p. 201.

45 Gilpin, *War and Change in International Relations*, p. 200.


