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# "POWER IN TRANSITION: THE GLOBAL SHIFT FROM WEST TO REST"

-Ankur Chettri<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ongoing global power transition from the Western-dominated international order to a more multipolar world shaped increasingly by emerging powers, especially in the East. It has focused on how the Western hegemony has declined politically, economically and institutionally, and has been paralleled by the rise of nations like China, India, and other non-Western actors. It has also focused on the Power Transition Theory; it has structurally examined how the rise of China in terms of military economy and institutionally has shown the power transition theory in practice, and highlighted the potential for conflict and cooperation. China's alarming economic growth, military modernisation, and global initiatives such as the Belt and Road Organisation show its efforts and ambition to reshape global power and undermine the global institutions' work on decentralisation. However, the West retains significant influence through its military alliances, technological innovation, and global norms. The paper argues that replacing the hegemony would not define the global order, but by a balance between the contestants, institutional adaptation and cooperative rivalry. As new powers rise and old ones adjust, understanding this transformation is critical for managing geopolitical risks and fostering a more inclusive and pluralistic world order as we move towards a multipolar world, moving away from the dominance of the Western world. This shift has been proven to be beneficial for the South Asian countries such as India, China and Brazil. Discussing the power transition, we must not neglect the influence of Russia and its contribution to balancing world powers during the 120<sup>th</sup> century.

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## INTRODUCTION

"Every great empire has fallen" is a century-old statement that still proves to be true the West, which has proved itself as the superpower, has started to decline, its power and influence have been slipping from its hand. The shift—West to Rest—is not merely economic. It is transforming geopolitics, culture, security, and the very architecture of international relations. For decades, mainly since World War II, the US and its European allies have shaped the global rules. But today, countries across Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa are stepping up, challenging old systems and expectations.

At its centre is the long-term economic growth in Asia spearheaded by China and India. These two nations, once ridiculed as developing countries struggling with poverty and insecurity, are now the destinations of some of the world's most vibrant economies, technological centres, and emerging middle classes. China's meteoric rise from a closed, impoverished country in the twentieth century to the world's second-largest economy—and by some measures, already the largest—has fundamentally altered perceptions of global hierarchy. India, too, is leveraging its massive population, youthful workforce, and high-tech sectors to assert a growing regional and international presence. It is important to recognise that this shift, often described as "the rise of Asia," is in many ways a return to historical norms since, prior to the Industrial Revolution, Asia accounted for more than half of global GDP and population. The last two centuries of Western ascendancy are, when seen from this long historical perspective, the exception rather than the rule.<sup>2</sup>

The 2008 Financial crisis has shaken the foundation of Western-led globalisation, its declining manufacturing industry, fiscal deficits and slowing economy. The United States, which emerged from World War II as the unmatched global hegemon and architect of the postwar "Pax Americana," now faces intensifying competition on several fronts. The rise of China through its China's Belt and Road Initiative, aggressive increment in its military budget, and growing

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<sup>2</sup> JOSEPH S. NYE, *SOFT POWER AND GREAT-POWER COMPETITION: SHIFTING SANDS IN THE BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA* (2023), <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-981-99-0714-4>.

diplomacy signal ambitions which is challenging the established order, particularly in East and Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the voice of recognition in global governance and the importance of redistribution of hard and soft power, is seen rising in other states such as Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia, and South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

The transfer of power from the West to the Rest is transforming international law, economics, and politics. It is not simply a transfer of state power, but of systems, institutions, and values on which global order is based. One must understand this transfer through its historical reasons, current directions, and unenclosed future. As the old order fades and a new one forms, the central questions for our time are how to manage transition, accommodate diverse interests, and forge new ways of living together in a more pluralistic, interconnected world.

## POWER TRANSITION THEORY

Power transition theory, conceptualised by A.F.K. Organski in 1958, is a major structural theory in international relations that explains how and why global power shifts occur and the consequences of such shifts for international order and stability.<sup>4</sup> “Power Transition theory is a dynamic and structural model for analysing fundamental shifts in global power. The theory itself, while maintaining its core concepts, has metamorphosed over time by adding new dimensions and addressing new topics. It is both data-based and qualitatively intuitive.

As a probabilistic theory, it has proven useful in predicting the conditions that forecast both conflict and cooperation at the global, national, and subnational levels of analysis. As a foreign policy tool, it creates historical signposts pointing toward tectonic shifts in nation state and alliance power profiles.<sup>5</sup>”

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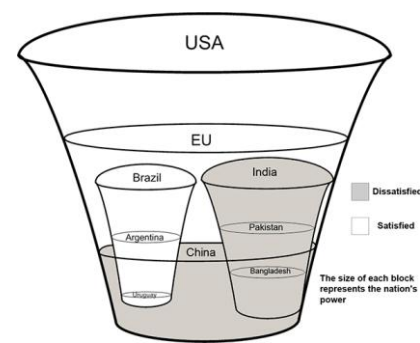
<sup>3</sup> Christopher Layne, *This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana: This Time It's Real*, 56 INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY 203 (2012).

<sup>4</sup> *The Rise of China Challenges, Implications, and Options for the United States*.

<sup>5</sup> PDF.

## HIERARCHY IN THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The theory assumes a hierarchical international system rather than an anarchic one. In this hierarchy, a dominant (or hegemonic) power sits at the top, shaping rules, norms, and institutions that reflect its interests and values. Below the dominant power are great powers, middle powers, and weaker states.<sup>6</sup> The “hegemon” establishes the status quo—a set of global arrangements thought to sustain systemic stability<sup>7</sup>.



Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the status quo of the challenger determines a potential major conflict. If a rising power benefits from the existing order, it may seek integration. However, if it is excluded or feels disadvantaged, it may seek to revise the system.<sup>8</sup> The most dangerous scenario, according to the theory, is when a dissatisfied challenger approaches parity with the dominant state and seeks to reshape the international system to suit its preferences.<sup>9</sup>

## PERIODS OF TRANSITION AND THE RISK OF CONFLICT

The probability of a major war is highest during a power transition this is what Power transition theory predicts. It may not be precedently violent, but the rising state's ambitions and the declining state's desire to preserve its privileged position can trigger conflict.<sup>10</sup> Historical examples include the rise of Germany, challenging Great Britain before World War I, and the ambitions of Japan prior to World War II. Recent scholars point to the potential danger in the current US-China relationship.<sup>11</sup>

The theory incorporates both long cycles of power (Modelski) and issues of "status quo" orientation (Gilpin, Kennedy). Satisfaction with the existing order is crucial: peaceful transitions are possible if the challenger is satisfied or the hegemon accommodates the rising power.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Rise of China Challenges, Implications, and Options for the United States, *supra* note 4.

<sup>7</sup> NYE, *supra* note 2 at 24.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 33.

<sup>9</sup> The Rise of China Challenges, Implications, and Options for the United States, *supra* note 4 at 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> NYE, *supra* note 2 at 49.

<sup>12</sup> The Rise of China Challenges, Implications, and Options for the United States, *supra* note 4 at 8.

## RELEVANCE TO CURRENT GLOBAL POWER SHIFTS

The contemporary global power shift illustrates power transition theory in action. China's rapid rise in economic, technological, and military might is narrowing the gap with the United States, creating what many analysts describe as a "power transition moment."<sup>13</sup> The satisfaction variable is still debated. Some argue China wants a greater role within rather than against the current order, while others point to areas—such as the South China Sea—where Beijing seeks significant change. The US, facing relative decline, may resist any revision of the post-1945 system it helped design. This scenario echoes Organski's warning: dangerous periods arise when a powerful but dissatisfied challenger seeks to revise the international system.<sup>14</sup>

Power transition theory helps us interpret current developments: the erosion of US hegemony, uncertainty about whether China is a status quo or revisionist power, and why global governance is under strain as more countries vie for influence. Capacity for peaceful transition will depend on whether institutional adaptation and mutual accommodation outweigh zero-sum rivalry and distrust.<sup>15</sup>

Think of the international system as a playground where one kid (hegemon) makes the rules and everyone generally follows along if they see benefits. If a new kid grows big, fast, and ambitious (challenger) but doesn't like the rules, a showdown becomes likely, especially if the old rule-maker doesn't want to compromise.

## THE POST-WWII WESTERN-LED ORDER

The United States, after World War II, took the responsibility for shaping the global institution and rules. Its main was to restore the economy that was devastated by war, foster global stability, and also prevent the world from rise of totalitarian threats that had earlier led to such devastations.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Global Power Shift from West to East*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 43.

<sup>15</sup> NYE, *supra* note 2 at 43.

This transformation began with the establishment of key economic frameworks at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, even before the war ended. Here, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were established whose main aim was to maintain and promote financial stability, manage exchange rates, and address the need for necessary capital for reconstruction and development. The US dollar became the anchor of the international monetary system, elevated to the status of primary reserve currency, a symbol of American economic leadership. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a precursor to the World Trade Organization (WTO), was designed to reduce barriers to trade and foster open markets, further deepening economic interdependence among nations and embedding liberal economic principles at the heart of the rules-based order. A western led institutions which had provided stability for decades known as the Bretton Woods system, formed the economic backbone. The structure ensured that market-oriented states gained a natural advantage, while states organised around administrative command economies initially found themselves outside the full benefits of the system.<sup>16</sup>

The Americans' unmatched military capabilities during WW II, a global network of bases, nuclear weapons and the construction of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) has positioned them as the global leader which also gave Washington the capacity to act as a global stabilizer. The USA's security to states in Europe, East Asia and the Middle East has not only boosted their economy but also showcases American power in international politics.<sup>17</sup>

The Western power and its institutions (i.e UN, EU, OECD) have aimed to promote liberal democracy, free markets and human rights; the framework created by this institution not only ensured stability also spreads norms and policies that shape global, economic management, and cooperation. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, the Western model set the standard and its institutions managed global disputes, steered development, and provided forums for addressing challenges from arms control to economic crises.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 1 RONALD L. TAMMEN, JACEK KUGLER & DOUGLAS LEMKE, FOUNDATIONS OF POWER TRANSITION THEORY 10 (2017), <http://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-296>.

<sup>17</sup> The Global Power Shift from West to East, *supra* note 13 at 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 6.

Despite decades of apparent Western dominance, early signs of shifting power dynamics became noticeable from the late twentieth century onward. Japan's postwar economic miracle marked the first major sign of successful catch-up by a non-Western nation. By the 1980s, Japan had become the world's second-largest economy, challenging the United States in sectors like automobiles and electronics and raising anxieties about the durability of American supremacy.<sup>19</sup>

## **MILITARY AND STRATEGIC POWER SHIFTS**

The distribution of military and strategic power across the globe has experienced a substantial transformation since the end of the Cold War. While the United States long stood as the uncontested global military hegemon, the last few decades have witnessed the emergence and consolidation of significant non-Western hard power capabilities. This process is characterised not by the disappearance of American primacy, but rather by a narrowing of the "power gap" as countries like China and Russia upgrade their defence spending, technological abilities, and capacity for regional and even global force projection.

## **CASE STUDIES: CHINA'S RISE AND AMERICAN RESPONSE**

The practical example of power transition theory is of the USA and China. This theory states possibility of a significant conflict is high when a rising power challenges the existing hegemon. It also opens a window for global governance and shows the practicality of the global institutions.<sup>20</sup>

The current world system of free markets, democratic governance, open trade and liberal thought is supported by the USA where as China's vision is quite contrary it emphasises sovereignty, gradual reform of institutions, and non-interference in domestic affairs. It has advocated its right to developmental autonomy, gave importance to economic growth and stability over liberal political reforms. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and its growing presence in United Nations peacekeeping illustrate China's bid to shape the rules and institutions of international commerce and diplomacy.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> James F. Hoge, *A Global Power Shift in the Making: Is the United States Ready?*, 83 FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2, 2 (2004).

<sup>20</sup> 1 TAMMEN, KUGLER, AND LEMKE, *supra* note 16 at 23.

<sup>21</sup> The Rise of China Challenges, Implications, and Options for the United States, *supra* note 4 at 8.



Points of cooperation still arise, both countries have partnered time and again, worked together and succeeded in areas such as climate change, piracy prevention, and pandemic response. These countries, are deeply economically intertwined, benefiting from trade, investment, and innovation spillovers.<sup>22</sup>

The United States concerns over China's rapid military modernisation, assertive claims over the South China Sea, its cyber operations and continuing efforts to undermine established international organisations or create alternative ones. Meanwhile, Beijing views American alliances in Asia, the "Pivot to Asia" policy, and advanced military deployments as attempts at containment. Both sides compete for leadership in frontier technologies—such as semiconductors, AI, and quantum computing—which have strategic and economic implications. The contest is not limited to hard power; it also extends into soft power, with each country seeking international legitimacy and influence through cultural, diplomatic, and economic outreach.<sup>23</sup>

This relationship is a near textbook example of power transition dynamics. The United States, as the status quo leader, seeks to preserve an open, rule-based international order and prevent the emergence of a peer competitor that might rewrite the rules. China, as the dissatisfied and ascending challenger, attempts to reshape structures to better reflect its interests and identity. Theorists warn that mismanagement and growing "dissatisfaction" could escalate into open confrontation, especially if trust erodes and diplomatic or economic disputes intensify.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the high stakes and deep interdependence between the two make cooperation attractive and necessary, aligning with the more optimistic predictions of peaceful accommodation if mutual interests are recognised and satisfied through inclusion and reform.<sup>25</sup>

Although China's rise is *prima facie* we must not forget that it is placed within broader secondary power transition dynamics, and India's emergence is also well apprected in the globally it is often characterised as a potential "swing state," its fast-growing economy, expanding military capabilities, and strategic autonomy to pursue an increasingly influential global role. It maintains a measured distance from alignment with either China or the United States, but often benefits from closer

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<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>24</sup> 1 TAMMEN, KUGLER, AND LEMKE, *supra* note 16 at 24.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 38.

economic and security ties with the latter. India advocates for a multipolar order that gives greater voice to the Global South and supports institutional reforms such as UN Security Council enlargement.<sup>26</sup>

Together, these overlapping power transitions form a complex, evolving global order. The primary U.S.-China contest embodies the high stakes and theoretical paradigms of power transition, while other emerging and re-emerging actors add layers of unpredictability and opportunity to the future of international system transformation.

## THE RUSSIAN ROLE IN THE POWER TRANSITION

- Putin characterises the collapse of the Soviet Union as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the Twentieth Century".

The rise and decline of Russia's influence in the global world have changed in both positive and negative ways over time.

Positive Changes in Russia's Global Influence: Russia emerged as a major European power after defeating Napoleon in 1812 and its involvement in the Congress of Vienna from 1814-15.<sup>27</sup> Its leaders focused on "national security, to territorial expansion"<sup>28</sup> and its standing on the world stage, often prioritizing this over the prosperity of its people. Interestingly, the very things that made Russia seem backward, like "autocracy, serfdom, poverty—could paradoxically translate into armed might"<sup>29</sup>, enabling it to mobilize its economy for war and draw resources and manpower from its unfree rural population. This showed that an "economically weak country with a large and disciplined army could prosper"<sup>30</sup> in geopolitical situations.

Territorial Expansion and Security Gains After 1815, Russia expanded its territory into Transcaucasia, reaching the Iranian border.<sup>31</sup> It also intervened militarily in Austria in 1849 to

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<sup>26</sup> *Will India Start Acting Like a Global Power? New Delhi's New Role*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Ellman, *Russia as a Great Power: From 1815 to the Present Day Part 1*, 19 JOURNAL OF INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMICS 1, 2 (2023).

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 5.

suppress Hungarian rebels. Russia built a large land empire where its colonies were directly connected to its homeland.<sup>32</sup> These expansions into the steppes were seen as mainly defensive, helping to "ended the danger of raids"<sup>33</sup> from groups like the Tatars. There were also economic benefits, such as gaining "additional arable land (Ukraine had a large area of good quality soil suitable for arable farming) and mineral resources (e.g. the Donbas coalfield)"<sup>34</sup>.

**Industrialization Efforts:** To keep up with the military strength of North-West Europe, Russia adopted a policy of industrialization. Count Witte, as Minister of Finance from 1892-1903, implemented policies like "railway construction (most dramatic-ally" (including the Trans-Siberian railway), "high import tariffs (which both protected domestic industry and generated income for the state)", and the "adoption of the gold standard". These efforts were quite successful, as by 1900, "Russia possessed an integrated iron and steel industry" that could compare with the best in Europe.<sup>35</sup>

**Soviet Era Influence:** During the Soviet period, the USSR had a unique advantage in international affairs through the "soft power provided by its ideology", which allowed it to create the Comintern to influence domestic politics in many countries and gain sympathy among left-wing groups globally.<sup>36</sup>

**19th Century Economic Weakness and Military Challenges:** Between 1815 and 1853, Russia's "relative economic position of Russia worsened" as North-West Europe industrialized.<sup>37</sup> Russia "lacked the revenue and industry to meet its military aspirations" and keep its military technologically advanced compared to other major powers like France and the UK.<sup>38</sup> The Russian army faced significant problems, including poor hygiene and medical care, which led to very high rates of disease. For instance, between 1825 and 1850, "more than 900,000 died from disease"

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<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>36</sup> Ellman, *supra* note 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

compared to only 30,000 deaths in combat.<sup>39</sup> Corruption also "undermined by corruption" the army's effectiveness.<sup>40</sup>

Collapse of the Empire: The defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) and the revolution it triggered in 1905 showed the "danger to the stability of the Empire that military weakness could cause."<sup>41</sup> The Empire ultimately collapsed in 1917 due to a "combination of pressure from its external and internal enemies"<sup>42</sup> including a prolonged war, severe food shortages, rapid inflation that generated "Massive discontent was generated" among the population, and army mutinies.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As the transition of power from West to Rest is taking place and has been continuously reshaping of international relations the West remains deeply rooted in global economics, growing stronger in military, and continues to strengthen global institutions. Rather than collapse, we are witnessing a redistribution of power that requires adaptation and negotiation. Power Transition Theory helps explain both the opportunities for peaceful evolution and the risks of rivalry if accommodation fails. The future will likely be neither fully Western-led nor dominated by any single challenger but a complex, contested order demanding new frameworks of cooperation. Managing this transition wisely will be crucial to ensuring stability in a rapidly changing world.

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<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*